DARK SOULS II: TOO EASY? FROM SOFTWARE SPEAKS

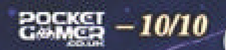


HIGHLIGHTS

■ THE EVIL WITHIN ■ CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2 ■ FIFA 14
■ METRO: LAST LIGHT ■ FIRE EMBLEM: AWAKENING ■ FLASHBACK HD
■ LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES ■ ZELDA 3DS ■ DEAD ISLAND: RIPTIDE

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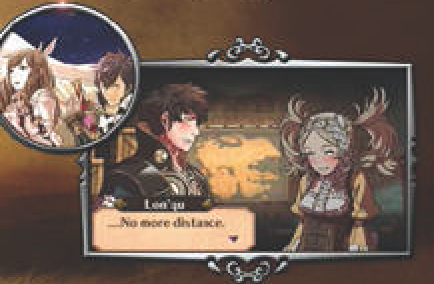
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FIRE EMBLEM Awakening

I'm new to this magazine, but I like to think I arrived at just the right time.

While there's plenty to get excited about in this issue, the unknown quantity that is *Cyberpunk 2077* is the project that's stuck with me as I near the end of this issue's production. From its beginnings as a pen-and-paper RPG to a large-scale ambitious videogame from CD Projekt Red, the journey of this next-gen title is fascinatingly complex – we've got the exclusive story in this issue.

Those decades-long tales of big success are genuinely uplifting, and there's more than one of those to look out for this month.

Meanwhile, our massive cover exclusive on *Battlefield 4* and our first look at *Grand Theft Auto V* demonstrate how building on acclaimed fundamentals is itself an exciting phenomenon. In both cases, EA and Rockstar are experimenting with ways in which to reinvent their respective sequels.

Success manifests itself in different ways, then – but the drive to show players something they've never seen before links all of these games, and the attempt at this alone makes for fascinating reading.

Samuel Roberts
EDITOR




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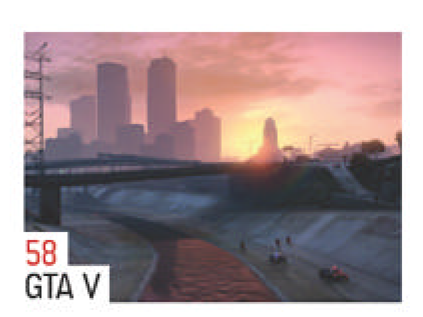


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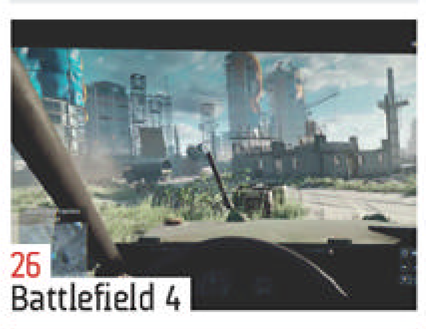

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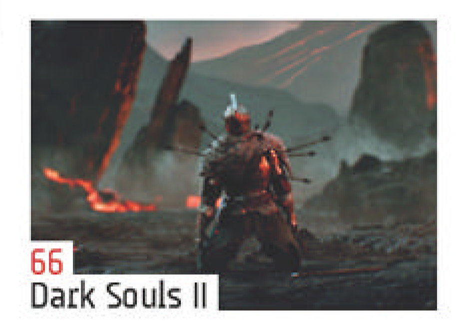
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grand theft auto
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58 Feature
Back to Los Santos with our massive preview feature
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Turn to page 94

Discuss



Inset We are lost trying to figure out who the fiery apparition and scarred man are that appear in the trailers, but if we had to bet, our money would be on *MGS3*'s Colonel Volgin. While he should be dead, it would make sense he'd want to take out his revenge against Boss, considering how he was laid to rest...



Below As the trailer wraps up, Big Boss is sat on a bike talking about a project called 'Devil Dogs', which could come to be the early incarnation of Outer Heaven. Note the fully functioning metallic prosthetic arm and the shimmering horn jutting from his head.

Below As Big Boss lies unconscious on a hospital bed, his long time friend (and eventual betrayer) Master Miller watches on helplessly from an adjacent bed. It's likely the pair's friendship will shatter in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain.*



DATA STREAM → NORDIC GAMES BUYS RED FACTION AND OTHER THQ IP, GEARBOX GETS HOMEWORLD

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Your guide to the essential stories



(FINAL CODEC CALL)

Metal Gear Solid V: Kojima's Bizarre Revolution

→ How Hideo Kojima is reinventing the Metal Gear franchise, perhaps for the final time

It is hard to believe, but it has already been five years since Kojima Productions delivered what many expected to be Hideo Kojima's opus, *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*. Taking series protagonist Solid Snake on his final Tactical Action Espionage voyage, *Guns Of The Patriots* saw a weary Snake (heavily aged due to his status as a clone) dropping back onto the battlefield to put down the ghosts that have haunted him for over two decades. An ending to a vivid legacy that any fan would be hard pressed not to have shed a tear to, and as Kojima once again spoke of his desire to back away from the series (with his 50th birthday looming in 2013) the franchise timeline went under lock and key.

At a *MGS* 25th anniversary event in 2012 however, Kojima announced *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes*. Set in the Seventies, it was due to follow the PSP's *Peace Walker* incident, taking the enigmatic Big Boss (Naked Snake) into new territory for the franchise. Ditching the cinematically-driven gameplay that came to define the series, instead opting for an open world, Kojima was coy on what we should expect – at the time simply offering it as a prologue for something else yet to be announced for 'high-end consoles'. Then it seemingly vanished; and we heard hardly a whisper surrounding *Metal Gear* until the Spike VGAs late last year, where *The Phantom Pain* was revealed. A new IP from a new studio, it looked distinctly *Metal Gear* but Moby Dick Studios CEO Joakim Mogren (note the first name anagram) was intent of subverting expectation – any public appearance from the CEO had been clouded in mystery as he wore full face bandages, echoing a character from *The Phantom Pain* trailer. Until San Francisco's GDC conference, all we could do was play along.

Strutting onto the stage at the outset of Kojima's 90-minute GDC conference 'Photorealism Through the Eyes of a FOX: The Core of *Metal Gear Solid Ground Zeroes*' then, came Joakim Mogren – sporting bandages as always. "Hello guys, thank you for joining us today," he said in a heavier Japanese accent than ever before. "As promised, I have our new trailer – take a look."

What followed wasn't simply a new trailer for *The Phantom Pain* or *Ground Zeroes*, but what we had expected all along, the two combine to create *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* – a bold new instalment into the franchise. Weaving footage from the two games together, the new trailer opens with Big Boss lying unconscious in a hospital; a doctor desperately struggling to revive him as Kaz 'Master McDonell' Miller hopelessly looks on from an adjacent bed. The doctors manage to stabilise Snake, though it took too long, he's fallen into a coma that he won't awaken from for nine years and with it, everything that we've seen in the year build up falls into place.

AS THE TRAILER wrapped to mass applause and cheers from the crowd at GDC, Joakim pulled off his bandaged mask to reveal Hideo Kojima, the creator of *Metal Gear Solid*. He spoke of the success of the franchise, and of how *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain* were one and the same.

Ground Zeroes will be a stand-alone story, serving as the prologue for *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, detailing the events that lead to Snake's coma and wounds. At the outset of the trailer we see Snake looking on from a helicopter as →

Below Much has been said about the FOX Engine, but if Kojima's assertion that this is running on a current generation hardware is true, then Kojima Productions has a wonderfully powerful engine on its hands.



"Honestly, I'm not even sure if I'll be able to release the game, and even if I did release the game maybe it wouldn't sell, because it's just too much"

Hideo Kojima, director





Discuss

➔ Mother Base, the oil rig military base from *Peace Walker*, is destroyed following an assault by XOF forces. Master Miller barely escaped with his life, though in this short sequence of events we aren't shown what leads Snake to his comatose state. Whether it's a betrayal by Miller – as alluded to by hidden scenes through *Peace Walker* – or perhaps shock from seeing his home and legacy collapsing, at this point nothing is certain. What we do know however is that while *Ground Zeroes* will have the same scope as the *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, it will be smaller in size, offering an impressive playground whose main intent is to set you up for the rest of *MGSV*. A Konami representative couldn't comment on how the game will be released; information on SKUs is elusive, then, but Konami did clarify to us that the only revealed info on this matter is that *Ground Zeroes* is the prologue to *The Phantom Pain* – everything else is unknown right now.

While the concepts of *Ground Zeroes* seem fairly easy to grasp, matters complicate somewhat, in classic Kojima tradition, once we try to dig into the elements that make up *Metal Gear Solid V*'s full release, *The Phantom Pain*. Snake awakens from his coma to find his left hand replaced with a hook prosthetic, a man wrapped in flames descends upon the hospital, a whale scoops a helicopter out of the sky, and a Psycho Mantis-esque figure floats through ceilings as Revolver Ocelot wills him onto the back of a horse for a forest showdown versus a spectral unicorn. As ever, trying to piece together elements of a *Metal Gear Solid* trailer is like trying to decipher an ancient Latin tapestry while blindfolded.



Inset Flaming unicorns, mysterious white lights and whales jumping through the sky – it wouldn't be a *Metal Gear* game if some elements of crazy didn't seep into otherwise serious proceedings.

OF COURSE THE footage released looks incredibly impressive, running on Kojima's FOX Engine; it's hard to believe the footage is being prepped for release on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 instead of next generation offerings. The engine seems capable of running photorealistic faces at environments, and when the Konami team demonstrated the 2012 *Ground Zeroes* demo with the lighting switched from night to day – it quickly becomes apparent that Kojima Productions has a monstrously powerful engine on its hands.

Below A bloody faced Snake watches on from a helicopter as his home and legacy, the oil rig Mother Base, collapses into the sea. The Fox engine does a wonderful job of rendering the pain in his eyes.

"The *Metal Gear Solid* series has been evolving towards my vision of what I think the stealth genre should be, and *Ground Zeroes* is the next step in that evolution," said Kojima when we spoke to him earlier in the year for **games™** 133. "Videogames as a medium really haven't matured very much in the past 25 years. It's always about killing aliens and zombies – not that I don't like those games, they're fun – but I think games have a long way to go before they can mature. Over the past 25 years I've tried to work with the *Metal Gear* series to introduce mature themes, but really it hasn't got there yet compared to movies or books. It still has a long way to go, and that's precisely what I want to try and tackle with my next project, *Ground Zeroes*."

At the time, *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* hadn't been announced, so we can only assume these comments extend past the *Ground Zeroes* prologue and onto the wider package. Kojima went on to tell how it will be his most controversial instalment



"The Metal Gear Solid series has been evolving towards my vision of what I think the stealth genre should be"
Hideo Kojima, director

Above As Snake is guided out of an under-assault hospital by the bandaged man Ishmael, we see a Psycho Mantis looking character eerily stare them down, before floating up through the ceiling. Series references aplenty, then, it seems.

➔ LIONHEAD FINDS NEW CEO, JOHN NEEDHAM, WHO HAS A BACKGROUND IN MMO DEVELOPMENT

of the franchise yet, and not just because he is moving away from cutscene driven gameplay (which he feels has become outdated), but because of the themes he is hoping to weave into the story.

"Honestly, I'm going to be targeting a lot of taboos – a lot of mature themes – that are really risky. Honestly, I'm not even sure if I'll be able to release the game, and even if I did release the game maybe it wouldn't sell because it's just too much. But as a creator I want to take that risk. As a producer it's my job to sell that game, but I'm approaching this project from the point of view of a creator. I'm prioritising creativity over sales."

In prioritising creativity over sales, it looks like Kojima is moving away from the set *MGS* template. Introducing an open world into the gameplay will likely divide fans, but it seems to be a necessary step when trying to usher the franchise forward. *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* fits snugly in one of the last major gaps of the timeline, between the *Peace Walker* incident and the original *Metal Gear*. Could we finally experience Big Boss' rise to power with the creation of Outer Heaven and the game looping around to Solid Snake's original infiltration? It's on the cards, but then, with a Kojima production so is everything else.

VIRAL MARKETING LEADING up to the *Metal Gear Solid V* reveal saw *The Phantom Pain* teased as an early incarnation of *MGS*'s virtual reality missions, in this instance used to help Snake overcome his damaged psyche and wounds following the events of *Ground Zeroes*. This would explain many of the fantastical and supernatural elements found throughout the trailer – it would also help Kojima avoid treading over already established canon. Then again, is he even in a coma at all? It's these sorts of questions we won't likely see answered until the games 2014 release, but it sure spawns a healthy amount of discussion between fans.

In the face of the next generation of consoles it's telling that *Metal Gear Solid* – a franchise that has entertained for over two decades – is still what sets the industry ablaze with speculation and excitement. Will ditching the bespoke elements of *Metal Gear* in favour of a more expansive universe be a success for Kojima Productions, or will its taboo themes and controversial material be too much for fans to handle? At this point it's too early to tell, but with the existing *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain* trailers, along with the new *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* trailer and a short Fox Engine demonstration, there is plenty for fans to analyse. As with anything Hideo Kojima, it's a question of separating the fact from fiction – and that's easier said than done.

STRANGEST REVEAL EVER

→ The odd, strung-out unveiling of Metal Gear Solid V

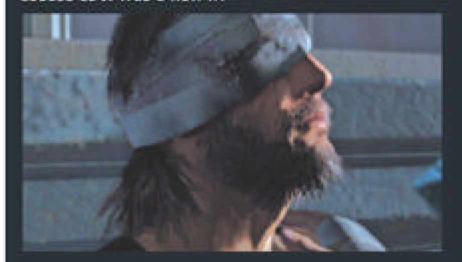


[1] 30 AUGUST 2012: GROUND ZEROES REVEALED

■ AT A 25TH ANNIVERSARY event ahead of PAX Prime, Hideo Kojima revealed *Ground Zeroes* and the beautiful FOX Engine. *Ground Zeroes* was set to be a prologue to an unannounced title, though Kojima was rather reluctant to say anything else on the matter.

[2] DECEMBER 2012 – THE PHANTOM PAIN DESCENDS

■ AT THE SPIKE VGA's *The Phantom Pain* was announced by a brand new Swedish developer known as Moby Dick Studios. The gameplay looked distinctly *Metal Gear* and the protagonist was a shadow of Big Boss, though they continued to assure us it was a new IP.



[3] INTRODUCING JOAKIM MOGREN

■ FOLLOWING THE REVEAL of *The Phantom Pain* we were introduced to Joakim Mogren, Moby Dick studio's CEO, by name only. Sending us further down the rabbit hole, Joakim's first name is an anagram of Kojima. Still Konami refused to confirm or deny its involvement with *Metal Gear*.



[4] JOAKIM MOGREN COMES OUT OF HIDING

■ JOAKIM MOGREN CONDUCTS his first ever interview with Geoff Keighly of GameTrailers. It didn't help but spark more controversy; Joakim's face was obscured in bandages, mirroring a character from *The Phantom Pain*.



[5] METAL GEAR SOLID V REVEALED

■ JOAKIM MOGREN COMES strutting into the GDC conference hall for Konami's 'Photorealism Through the Eyes of a FOX' panel. After announcing *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, Joakim pulled off the bandages to reveal a smiling Hideo Kojima.



→ RATCHET & CLANK BECOMES A MOVIE, OVERSEEN BY INSOMNIAC, COMING TO CINEMAS IN 2015 →

Inset Rico's plot is almost totally irrelevant to how most people play the silly, silly game.

“Everything on the console [PS4] has been a little bit more unified. If I generalise, it's like PC”

Stefan Ljungqvist, studio creative director

(NO CAUSE FOR CONCERN)

Avalanche Studios: Surviving The Next Gen

→ Avalanche Studios is famous for its open-world series Just Cause – but the developer has turned quiet over the past couple of years. We caught up with CEO Christofer Sundberg and studio creative director Stefan Ljungqvist at GDC to discuss the shift to mobile experiences and Avalanche's commitment to open world games

You're working on mobile games – why, when your history is in console games?
CHRISTOFER It was a way for us as a studio to be more prepared for the future. It's been a tough couple of years. We've seen publishers and developers die right and left, companies that you'd never believe would end up in that situation. THQ, wiped off the map. People are so fixed on one way for the industry to get out of the situation it's in. I don't think there is a perfect recipe, it's such a mix between what IP you're working on, what type of developer you are, your past games and so on. They form that recipe. That led to us starting up what I call the 'Mobile Division' – three people working on a mobile game. It's something we're building up internally.

STEFAN One thing about mobile games for us, it's about releasing more games. We're a big studio, but we've only released a few games; mobile allows us to release more frequently and try out more creative ideas.

Are you working on mobile games or crossplatform at the moment?
CHRISTOFER Right now, it's a standalone game. We'll try to prove the business model is working with the first game. It's not a huge investment from Avalanche's side, but it's something we're self-funding. We hope to get it right the first time.

Do you do work for hire?
CHRISTOFER We do one licensed game, one original IP, and the mobile game is obviously original IP, and then we have *The Hunter*, from a fully-owned subsidiary called Expansive Worlds who are developing this free hunting game tied to social networks. It's so different from what I'd like Avalanche to be associated with – which is big open-world games, lots of explosions and action and a little bit of craziness – yet the community behind it is so dedicated and passionate about the game. It's more of a serious hunting experience, I guess.



Below *The Hunter* is one of the few games most enjoyable when doing absolutely nothing.

Do you think you'll work on third-party consoles, like the Ouya, or is that too much fragmentation for a small studio to do?
CHRISTOFER It depends if it's a commercially successful platform; if it is, we'd definitely look to support it. I was a backer, so I have their development kit. I like having it on my desk, it makes me look intelligent.

Is it an open world game?
CHRISTOFER It's definitely an open world game. I mean it's a huge forest! A hunting simulation. It's so fantastic. It was reviewed on Swedish television and the guy said it's the first game where he spent 45 minutes doing absolutely nothing. He loved it. Just staring into the forest. I'm waiting for my Oculus Rift development hardware to arrive... that's such a perfect piece of hardware for a game like *The Hunter*.

It's been very interesting building up the Avalanche product portfolio, so we can be ready for what the future might hold. When you say next-generation, what everyone think is the photorealistic graphics and super-detailed characters. I think most developers will be able to pull that off. What we're competing for, developers and publishers, is the consumer's time. We want to own every gamer's time from when they wake up in the morning, until actually they should be dreaming about our games.

STEFAN Sony, when it announced the PS4, they were very open that it wasn't stuck in



NEXT XBOX REVEAL COMING ON 21 MAY, MASSIVE FEATURE COVERAGE COMING NEXT ISSUE


Above The range of locales in *The Hunter* makes it totally immersive.

the traditional model, that it allowed smaller developers to make games on its platform and that will open up so many doors for different models.

Are all the ideas you've come up with been open world games?
CHRISTOFER Yep, absolutely. That's what we do, the space we're in, where we can compete. We would never do a level-based military shooter. Very few people played through the story in *Just Cause 2*.

Everyone keeps saying that this is the last console generation; does that want you to make more PC games?
CHRISTOFER We will see. I really believe in the console as an entertainment centre. I think what would make the consoles survive is how we can go beyond making just great looking games and make something you can live with for a longer time that just eight to ten hours. Someday, I'm sure there will be some idea coming out of Avalanche where we use Move or Kinect the way it should be used, but also with the new PlayStation controller and the share button, there are so many ways to interact with each other and basically brag, to show off the cool shit to do in your games.

STEFAN From a developer point of view, everything on the console has been a little bit more unified. If I generalise, it's like PC. That's kinda good. Before, the first parties were trying to make their own hardware structures really unique and maybe you could argue that there were some consoles that had more power in some areas than others at that time, but it made it harder for us, if you were really good, to be a cross-console developer.

Would you ever make a game with no story whatsoever?
CHRISTOFER It's possible. It's a matter of how rich and engaging you can make the world. That's where the thing can have a very long and rich life. I mean today, three years after release, *Just Cause 2* still has hundreds of thousands of players active. It's unheard of.

WHAT NEXT FOR AVALANCHE?

The best fan-developed re-imaginings out there, either in production or released

CHRISTOFER WAS evasive at our meeting but, then, all the developers we talked to at GDC were, looking over their shoulders for the inevitable lawyer's meaty mitt slamming down. Yes, they're all NDAed up to the hilt but, wait, what leaked light is that on yonder horizon? Yes, it's three website registrations from Warner Bros, all of which seem to point to an Avalanche made *Mad Max* game. Max, played by Mel Gibson in the movies of the same name, was a slightly grumpy post apocalyptic policeman whose family are killed by rampaging bandits and who takes a predictably aggressive revenge. They also had two other games in production, though Christofer only talked about one. One is a Square Enix *Just Cause* style game; the other is a comic book tie in. And, as Christofer hinted, they're all open world.


Above *Mad Max* or *Just Cause*? Avalanche isn't quite ready to lift the lid on its next big project yet.

EXTRA CREDIT

> TECH

3DS XL CIRCLE PAD PRO



We've been waiting a while, but Nintendo has finally released the Circle Pad Pro for 3DS XL consoles. It's kind of a big deal, given that anyone who upgraded to the meatier handheld would find games like *Kid Icarus: Uprising* and *Resident Evil: Revelations* pretty cumbersome without the additional analogue pad.

> CONSOLE

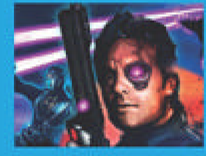
OUYA



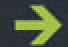
While **games™** will be taking a closer look at the Android console with a full verdict in the next issue, early reviews have started to pour in across the internet. One major criticism is the quality of construction - noting that the controller feels cheap and breakable. Nevertheless, the potential of the cut-price console is unquestionable and you can now pre-order your own through GAME online.

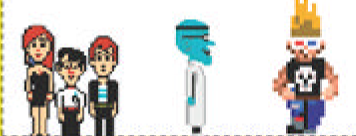
> FILM

FAR CRY 3 BLOOD DRAGON 'THE CYBER WAR'



To coincide with the recent release of the *Far Cry 3* spin-off, Ubisoft has produced a tongue-in-cheek live-action short film rich in trashy Eighties action movie clichés. *The Cyber War* introduces Commander Bolt Lightning and who battles through an android army to stop a deadly virus eviscerating the world. Our verdict: better than any *Far Cry* movie to date.


DEADPOOL WILL BE RELEASED ON 28 JUNE IN THE UK ON PC, PLAYSTATION 3 AND XBOX 360



(A GREAT DISTURBANCE IN THE FORCE)

Ron Gilbert remembers LucasArts

→ In a special editorial, one of the founding fathers of adventure gaming, Ron Gilbert, reflects on his time at the Monkey Island studio

To a lot of people who love *Maniac Mansion, Zak McKracken, Grim Fandango, Sam and Max*, or *Monkey Island*, it is LucasArts. But for me it will always be Lucasfilm Games. I was sad to learn that it is gone forever.

I haven't worked there since 1992, but it was still home to me and I considered it my family. I learned just about everything I know about designing games there. I became a real programmer there. I made lifelong friends there. Some of the most memorable and influential years of my life were spent there. I would not be who I am today without Lucasfilm Games.

I was hired in 1984 to port a game called *Koronis Rift* from the Atari 800 to the Commodore 64. I vividly remember interviewing in an office with Noah Falstein and Aric Wilmunder as I explained how you wrote pixels to the Commodore 64 screen with its screwed up memory mapping. They seemed impressed. Or confused. Either way, I got the job.

My first week at Lucasfilm Games was mind blowing. I had never met a smarter group of people in my life. From Noah to Aric, to Gary Winnick to David Fox, to Chip Morningstar to Doug Crockford – I had so much to learn.

People often ask me what made Lucasfilm Games so special and unique during those early days? To me it comes down to two things. The first was that is was Lucasfilm at the

“ Not being able to make [Star Wars games] freed us in ways that I don't think we understood at the time ”

Ron Gilbert, ex-LucasArts







→ CAPCOM CITES EXCESSIVE OUTSOURCING AS THE REASON BEHIND WEAKER FINANCIAL RESULTS IN 2012/13





height of its popularity and mystique, and the second was we couldn't make *Star Wars* games. All of us were huge *Star Wars* fans (who isn't?), and here we were working at Lucasfilm for George Lucas and we couldn't make *Star Wars* games.

Before Lucasfilm had a games group, the exclusive licence for *Star Wars* games had been given to Atari. Had we been allowed to make *Star Wars* games, that is all we would have made. But not being able to make them freed us, freed us in ways that I don't think we understood at the time. Without that freedom, there would have been no *Maniac Mansion* or *Monkey Island*.

NOT BEING ABLE to make *Star Wars* games, but being part of this amazing placed called Lucasfilm put an energizing creative pressure on us. We always felt we had to be making games that were different and pushed the creative edges. We felt we had to live up to the Lucasfilm name. George once told us: "Be the best, stay small and don't lose any money."

That was our mission. Working there was like being part of a creative Cambrian explosion. We fed off the creativity of each other and dreamed whatever we dared. We were free of market pressures, yet we all wanted to make games that sold well. We wanted to make games that a lot of people played and loved. We were passionate, naive and idealistic.

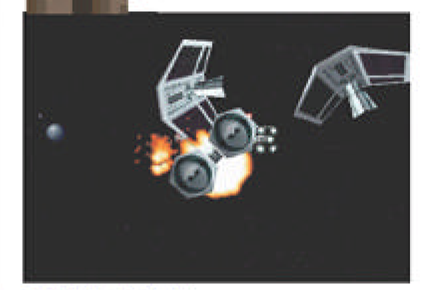
Maybe Lucasfilm Games was just a perfect storm – the right people, at the right time, in the right place. Whatever it was, I am proud, honoured and humbled to have been a part of it.

Will a company like Lucasfilm Games ever exist again? I don't know, but if it does, it will take an eccentric billionaire with a vision to let people be free and dream and play and stay small and be the best.





TOP 5 LUCASARTS MOMENTS



REBEL SCUM!

GAME: TIE Fighter

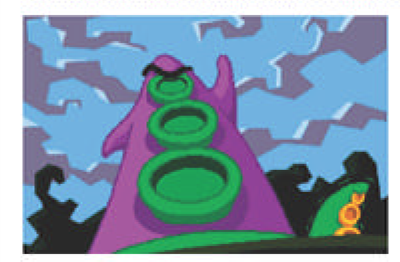
A ROUTINE INSPECTION of a shipping transport reveals a hidden cluster of rebel X Wings! What ensued was one of the most taut, nerve shredding dogfights found in videogames. Outgunned and outnumbered, it emphasised the frailty of the TIE Fighter.



THE RETURN OF AN OLD FRIEND

GAME: Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis

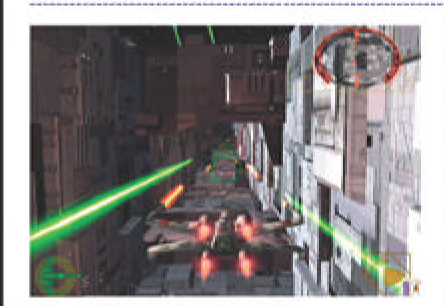
WHILE THE SCENE may have played out a little more slapstick than we're used to from Dr. Jones, the opening to *Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis* set the tone for what was to come: a highly amusing and reverent recreation of the classic Saturday matinee film series.



PURPLE TENTACLE

GAME: Maniac Mansion/Day Of The Tentacle

HE DOESN'T LOOK nefarious, but Purple Tentacle remains one of the greatest creations of LucasArts. He is evil, though (check out the unibrow), transformed by radiated water into a malevolent force hell bent on world domination. It was never going to work out for the slimy sociopath, based purely on his ungainly form.



THAT'S NO MOON

GAME: Star Wars Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader

THE OPENING LEVEL of the *Rogue Squadron* sequel replicated the climax of the original *Star Wars* film perfectly. The soundtrack, Obi Wan's ethereal wisdom and the howl of Han Solo as he blasts Vader into space it was 1977 all over again.

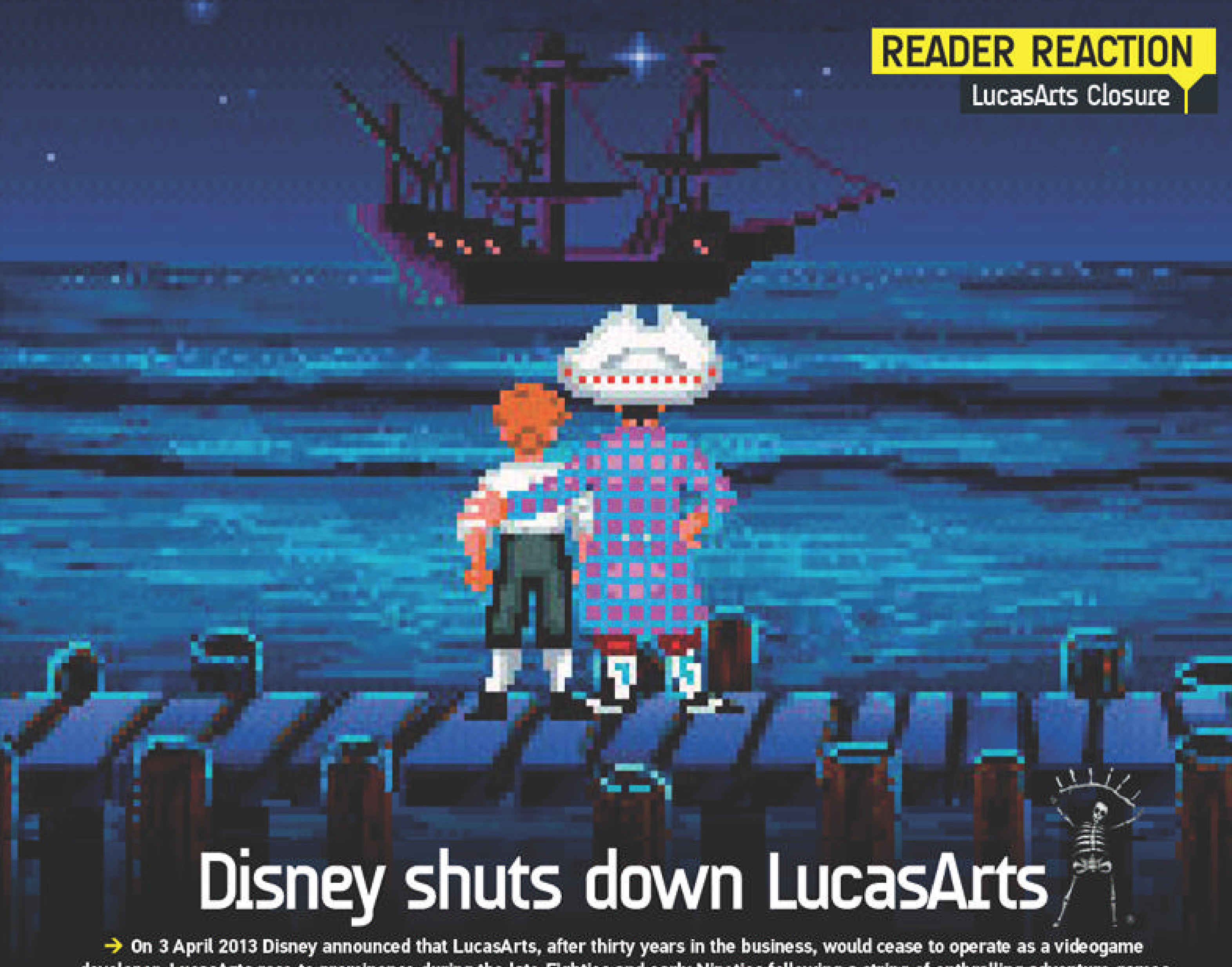


YOU FIGHT LIKE A DAIRY FARMER

GAME: The Secret Of Monkey Island

ONE OF THE most iconic moments from the legendary adventure game series is a rather simple tête à tête filled with playground jibes. It's a scene that encapsulates why the series is beloved to many with its playful, unique humour that wasn't just part of *Monkey Island* but all LucasArts adventure games of the period.

EVE ONLINE IS BEING ADAPTED FOR TELEVISION SCREENS, TAKING STORY CUES FROM USER EVENTS



Disney shuts down LucasArts

→ **On 3 April 2013 Disney announced that LucasArts, after thirty years in the business, would cease to operate as a videogame developer. LucasArts rose to prominence during the late Eighties and early Nineties following a string of enthralling adventure games – including *The Secret Of Monkey Island* and *Maniac Mansion* – and a plethora of quality *Star Wars* titles. In recent years the studio's internal output dwindled as it almost exclusively turned to publishing. However, the impact that the developer had on both the careers of its alumni and a generation of gamers will make it missed by many. The games™ community reacts and remembers LucasArts…**

It's sad in the way that the studio gave us so many classics over the years (*Day Of The Tentacle* is one of my favourite games ever), but most of the people who worked on the classics have moved on. When was the last time LucasArts released a great title? Maybe it's better we remember them for their greats…
Andy O'Flaherty, Facebook

The adventure genre has seen a great resurgence of late and the legacy of LucasArts casts a long shadow. #ThreeHeadedMonkey
Jonny Wick , Twitter

LucasArts took point-and-click to the next level. Made a legend of @ grumpygamer [Ron Gilbert]. SCUMM and GrimE never tasted so good!
Andy Caomhánach, Twitter

Sad to see it go but it was inevitable in the end. Their recent releases have been lacklustre.
Bobby Graham, Twitter

It's a sad announcement. I remember crying with laughter at the *Monkey Island* Series. My best problem solving gaming experience was spent one long night at University trying to complete *Day Of The Tentacle*. I'm not so up to date with their recent developments, but the *X-Wing* series, and the SCUMM games are a very happy part of my gaming history.
Allan Shepherd, Facebook

Fondest memory is of playing *The Eidolon*, a gorgeous first person game on 8-bit hardware. Being scared by the alien in *Rescue On Fractalus!* comes a close second. As for the closure, I feel it is a real missed opportunity - where was the remastered *Maniac Mansion/ Day Of The Tentacle*, or the next-gen *X-Wing*, or even a completed *Star Wars Battlefield 3*? Disney needs to produce brilliant new *Star Wars* films and games to make amends.
Merman, games™ forum

I think it was time they closed. I look back at their Nineties games fondly, but struggle to name anything recent that was any good. Closing makes sense from a quality perspective… outsourcing to developers may be more costly but they're likely to produce better genre games, it's just a shame for the staff and I guess the nostalgic fans
Chris Huggett, Facebook

X-Wing – First game I bought for the PC and a classic. Shame there is unlikely to be a remake on Kickstarter any time soon.
Mark Gregory, Twitter

It's a good move in my opinion. If I have read it right, it potentially gives someone like EA Games or Rockstar the opportunity to licence the franchises from Disney and create some top games that LucasArts didn't have the budget for.
Rob Matthews, Facebook



(SOUND AND VISION)

Oculus Rift: THE VERDICT

→ Is it the future of videogames or just an expensive peripheral? **games™** takes a closer look at Oculus Rift

We've talked about the Oculus Rift before in passing, but after a recent hands-on with the device and a series of GDC talks, we've decided we're seriously impressed. Which, if we're honest, is something of a surprise.

The initial model we tried late last year was inventor Palmer Luckey's own creation – a bodged–up device made up of two small 5–inch screens and a whole lot of duct tape. To make a device such as this requires two things – a basic grasp of how the eye and brain take in and process data – and a knowledge of the engineering principles that allow you to fool the brain into thinking it's in a virtual environment.

There's a third skill as well, that Palmer himself just couldn't have, crucial for the development model we tried at GDC – experience of getting stuff made on a massive scale. That particular skill comes from the team backing him – made up of a former Activision development boss, one of the Gaikai founders, and in particular, Jack McCauley, the man who designed the *Guitar Hero* peripherals, who's managing the Chinese manufacturing of the OR devices.

Having the Rift on your head is a unique experience. It takes a little while to adjust it to your personal physiognomy, as it has to sit just right in front of your eyes – and Nate Mitchell, of the team, admitted to us that not everyone with poor vision will be able to use the device. "We can only solve so many problems," said Mitchell. Yet, once you've tried it, it is immersive – there is some trick your brain plays on you so that it is utterly convincing, even though you can see the low resolution and feel occasionally nauseous.

RUNNING AROUND A virtual environment is extremely compelling, and, unlike 3D used in cinema, it doesn't feel like smoke and mirrors. The three games – *Doom 3*, *Hawken* and *Unreal 3* – that we've tried with the Rift were all first-person shooters, and it's



Above *Team Fortress 2* is the first game to support Oculus Rift natively - be warned, though, as rocket jumping, strafing and playing as the scout can induce a severe case of nausea.

Inset Whether Oculus Rift succeeds as a concept or not, there's no doubt that it's found fans within the development community.

definitely this perspective that is best suited to the Rift, initially at least.

Yet, we can't help but salivate at the concept of a top–down strategy game played this way, or *XCOM*'s Geoscape, or even simulations like the *IL-2 Sturmovik* or *Silent Hunter* series. Other developers appear to be supporting the device too; DICE are converting their Frostbite engine

> "Gamers are used to the gamepads; aiming in an FPS with your neck muscles is frustrating"

to run on the headset, so expect series like *Battlefield*, *Mass Effect*, *Need for Speed* and *Dragon Age* to be compatible in the future. Then there's id's John Carmack, who has been a fervent supporter; Valve who has already converted *Team Fortress 2* for Rift; and recently a bunch of UK students have come up with an oceanic exploration game called *Undercurrent*. And there are 12,000 more developers out there, ranging from Jonathan Blow to Robert Bowling and Terry Cavanagh, who've ordered devices but have yet to reveal their intention with it.

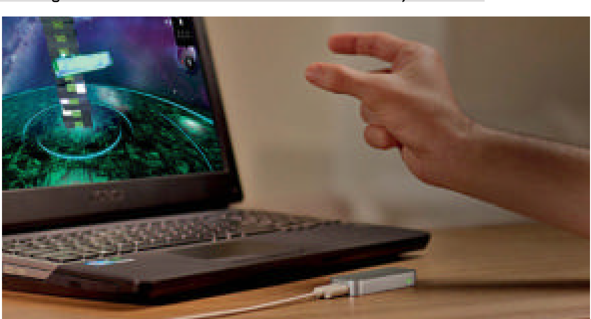
The team also showed off two more bespoke prototypes created to inspire



NINTENDO WILL NOT DO AN E3 CONFERENCE THIS YEAR, FOCUSING INSTEAD ON ITS DIRECT PRESENTATIONS



Left This prototype design looks odd, but videos online of the Omni working with the Rift has to be seen to be believed. It just works.



developers; a driving simulator – where you could turn your head right back around to help with reversing – and an exploration game set in a Tuscan villa similar to *Myst* or *The Witness* where you interact with the environment. The latter was interesting, because it emphasised the outputs aren't all that's important with VR – you need innovative inputs too.

Whilst we were using the device, the major immersion breaker (apart from the technical problems Valve's Michael Abrash mentioned at GDC – see our boxout below for more details) is that you can't see your hands. Our manipulators are so fundamental to our concept of reality that it's odd not to the see those familiar waggly tentacle things flapping around in front of you. To compensate, the Tuscany demo was supported by two Razer Hydra motion-control devices.

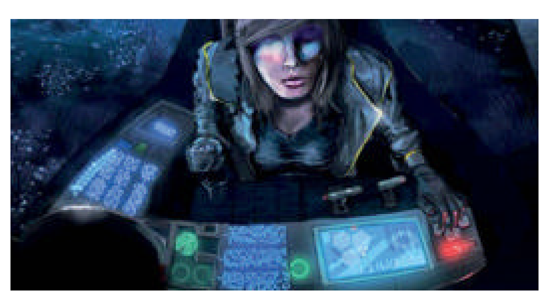
ON A DIFFERENT TRACK, we've also seen several feet-tracking devices that allow for even deeper immersion, ranging from giant spheres to the bizarre *Virtuix Omni,* which lets you walk around as if you're in a virtual world. At the moment, though it's fun to play modern games with the Rift, it's not easy. Where gamers are used to the gamepads and keyboard-mouse controllers of this world, aiming in an FPS with your neck muscles is frustrating – they're just not as accurate or acute as your hands.

However, disconnecting your aiming from your sight, while it's extremely cool, is also extremely difficult. It might be easy for humans to glance aside when aiming a gun, it's not so easy when you're used to looking with the mouse. Similarly, the low resolution and curved screens mean that traditional HUDs just don't work.

Essentially, games need to be made specifically for the device, and not simply converted like the ones we're seeing now. So *Undercurrent* and its ilk, rather than *Call Of Duty,* could be a more feasible future of Oculus Rift, but it's still one that's a couple of years off.

Above The tiny leap motion device will almost certainly be integrated into consumer-level Rifts, as it retails at just $80 and works perfectly with hand movement.

Below While it's only a rather modest student project from the UK, *Undercurrent* will have players exploring the ocean in a submarine and perhaps the best example of how Oculus Rift can be used to enhance videogame experiences.



THE GAP BETWEEN THE RIFT AND REALITY

→ games™ investigates Valve's own leap into VR

VALVE'S MICHAEL ABRASH spent most of his career as a high-up programmer at Microsoft, but he knows his virtual reality. He's heading up Valve's attempts to make augmented reality simulations – that is, games like *Star Trek's Holodeck*, which integrate game elements directly with reality, so that the two can be indistinguishable. Yet he sees problems with VR and Oculus Rift. The first is resolution; for wide fields of view that close to the eye, you need a pixel density hundreds of times where the tech is currently. Similarly motion-tracking in VR needs to be superfast – less than 20ms including panel response and processing times – which we're nowhere near. Rift doesn't even track sideways motion, so players can feel nauseous strafing. Though Abrash is pessimistic, he's also a perfectionist and whatever he's brewing over at Valve is sure to make a sizeable impact in the industry.

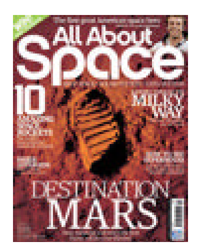
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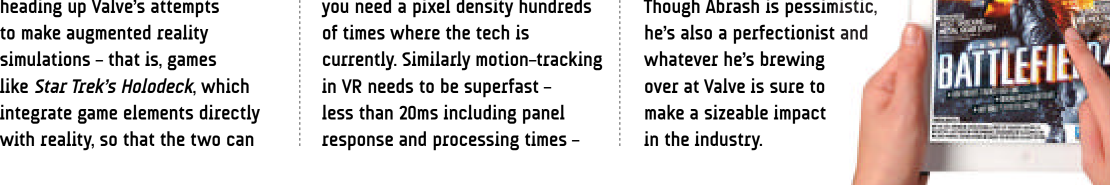
NowGamer.com will be gearing up to E3 throughout the month of May, delivering all the gaming news, interviews and Xbox 720/PS4 rumblings ahead of the hotly anticipated event in June. There will also be a plethora of exclusive content, including previews of biggest upcoming titles, reviews of *Remember Me* and *The Last Of Us* and video features delivering daily audio-visual goodness for the benefit of the internet. You won't need to go anywhere else.

All About Space



Issue 12 of **All About Space** magazine kicks off with a look at how various agencies and companies intend to take humans to Mars. Inside, we explore the deepest secrets of the universe with fascinating articles on Titan boats, the Milky Way, the Moon, teleportation, ten great rockets and much more. Pick up your copy of **All About Space** today.

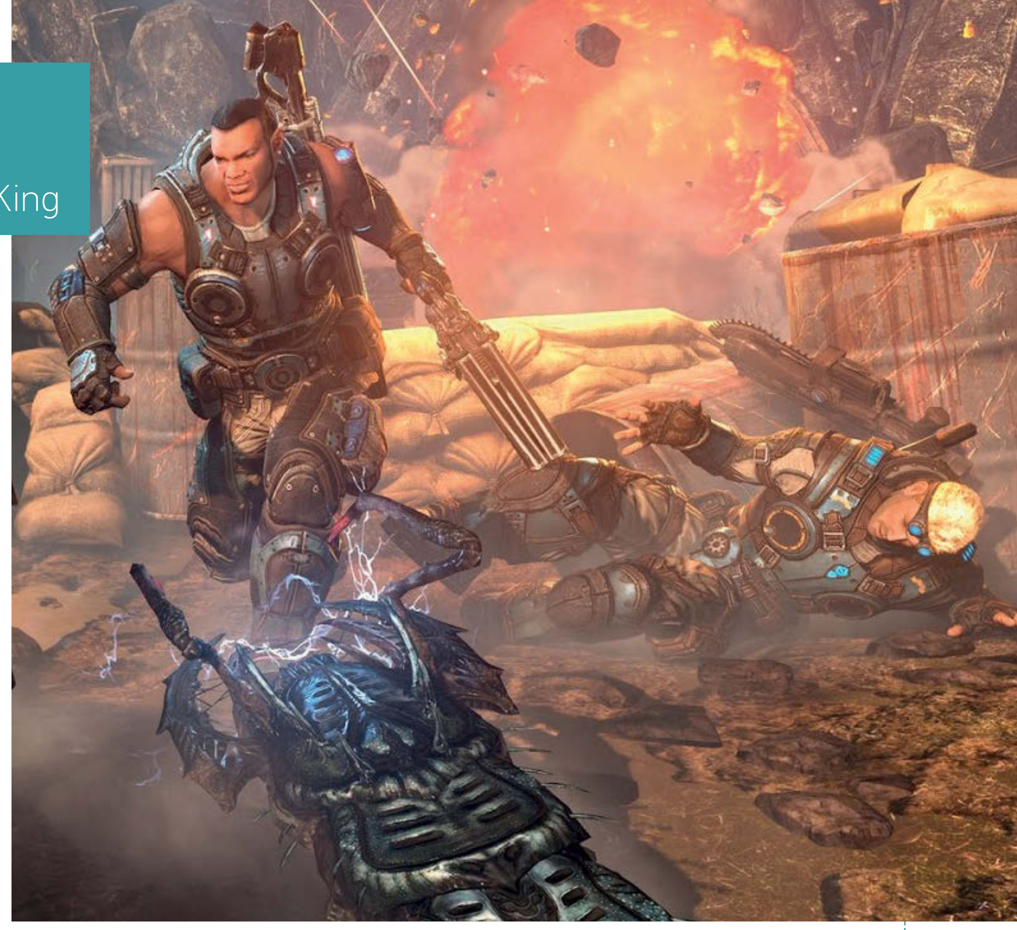
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→ CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS ACCIDENTALLY REVEALED BY RETAILER, DEVELOPED BY INFINITY WARD →

#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



This generation is ending with a whimper. Is it our fault?



Disclaimer: I am a huge *Gears Of War* fan. More specifically, I am a huge *Gears Of War multiplayer* fan. The emphasis on flanking, the finger dexterity necessary to wall-bounce around corners, the need to learn weapon placement on maps and the shotgun battles, its style of gameplay resonates with me. It doesn't rely on twitch shooting, which also means I can compete, unlike *Call Of Duty* or *Battlefield* where my dimming reactions have me staring at killcams far too often (I'm 30 years old now! Even getting off the sofa to scream at my TV in rage takes a little longer than it used to.)

But multiplayer decisions don't appear to have been thought out particularly well. Having modes play out as COG vs. COG rather than vs. Locust mean audio cues ("Grenade!") are confusing, as you can no longer tell which side is shouting. The ability to drop off ledges has turned Execution into a Benny Hill chase, as you can't 'trap' the last remaining player in a corner. Blah blah blah, on it goes. It's still a good game thanks to the same core mechanics that served its predecessors but the biggest problem is, in the crudest terms, is that no-one seems to *really* give a shit about *Gears Of War: Judgment*.

In many ways, *Judgment* feels like contractual work to punch in another *Gears Of War* title before the sun sets on this generation, evident by the lack of maps and brevity of the campaign. There's a bizarre feeling of apathy that seeps through the greys and browns of Halvo Bay that has infected the community as well – online playlists are often deserted, with '0 users are playing your region' messages too common for a game this soon after its release. The same gamertags keep cropping up again and again, night after night, bots frequently standing in for players who leave as there is no-one in line to replace them. The decision to split the userbase into those with VIP passes and those without has done more damage than good to the multiplayer community.

> Is our apathy towards these titles the result of an end-of-generation apathy setting in?

It's not just *Gears Of War* either. *God Of War: Ascension* didn't have the seismic impact of its predecessors, the angriest man in Olympus inspiring little more than a meh and a shrug of the shoulders from Kratos fans. *Assassin's Creed III* was a buggy mess without direction, a series that has stretched too far and too soon in an effort to justify yearly sequels. *Lightning Returns* doesn't look like it will be the game to revitalise the *Final Fantasy XIII* name, with it being the second sequel-of-a-sequel.

Is our apathy towards these titles the result of an end-of-generation ennui setting in? Have we now become bored of the current standards and gameplay ideas? Some publishers (such as Square Enix) have argued that this generation has lasted too long. Imagine if the generation had ended, say, two years ago – no *Gears Of War: Judgment*, no *God Of War: Ascension*, no *Assassin's Creed III*. The next iterations of those games would have arrived on next-generation hardware instead, with a chance to provide a much-needed adrenalin shot to those series, in terms of gameplay, scale and ambition. Whether that chance would be seized is another argument but regardless, the opportunity would have been there. Instead, we have tired sequels that struggle to justify their existence, let alone build upon the standards set previously.

Have we become jaded? It's an argument that's becoming more common, as though we've become collectively beaten down by endless sequels, pre-order and DLC initiatives, marketing double-speak and buggy releases. Yet looking at other recent releases, the answer is an emphatic no.

Tomb Raider was a textbook example of how to reboot a series that had worn out its welcome with stale sequels. *BioShock Infinite* proved fresh ideas and dizzying ambition can overcome 'sequelitis'. *Injustice: Gods Among Us* is a rare example of fresh IP clocking in at the end of a generation, even if it is arguably little more than a reskinned *Mortal Kombat* sequel. Look at how those games have been received. Bored? Jaded? Us? Not even close.

But the likes of *Gears Of War: Judgment*, *God Of War: Ascension* and *Assassin's Creed III* just aren't good enough for fans. And the sad truth for publishers is that by trying to squeeze those last few dollars from their trusted IPs now, they've damaged them – they'll have to work twice as hard to win back disenchanted fans next gen.

And I say that as a huge *Gears Of War* fan.

Ryan King is editor of NOWGamer.com



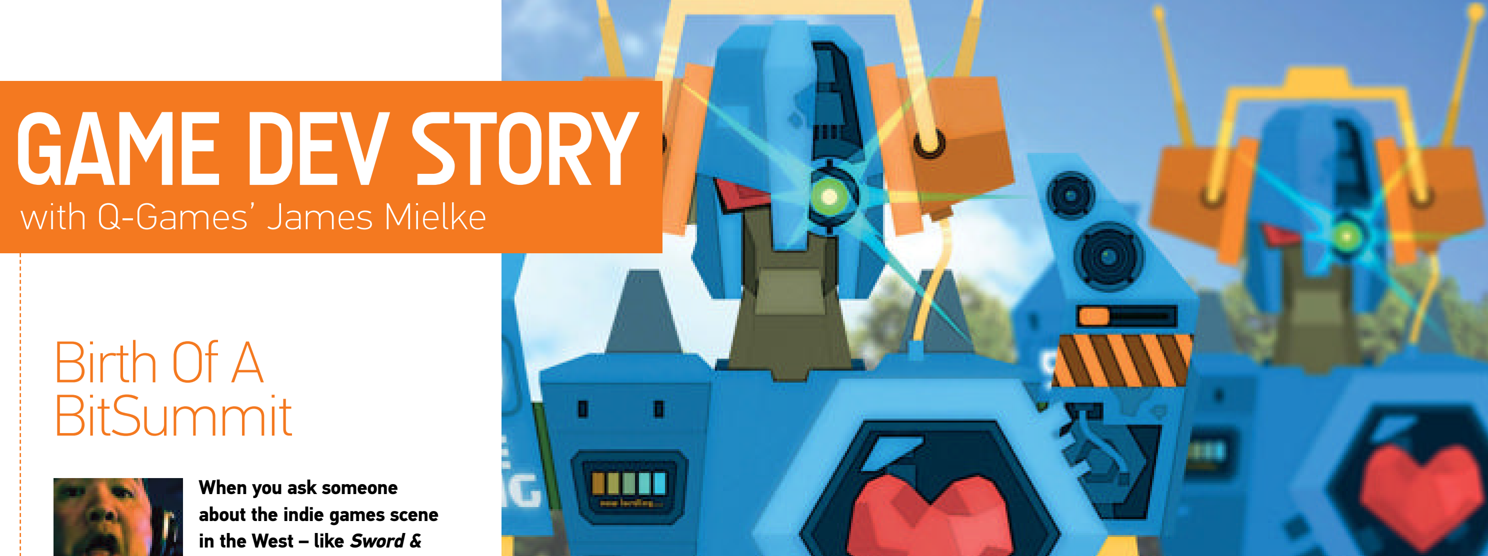
Infinite Crisis

→ Batman goes MOBA in Warner Bros' latest foray into the nascent genre

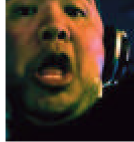
The multiplayer online battle arena's (MOBA) stratospheric rise in popularity can mostly be attributed to *League Of Legends* – which continues to host several million players on its servers daily – yet it's curious that the sub-genre remains on the fringes of mainstream recognition. If there's one feature that's likely to change that, then it's a marketable and recognisable licence and so it comes, hot on the heels of *Guardians Of Middle-earth*, that Warner Bros. has opted to delve into the DC multiverse for its second MOBA, *Infinite Crisis*. It's a fertile new stage for action, with the fiction enabling players to embody twisted incarnations of well-known DC heroes and villains – including Nightmare and Gaslight Batman, who appear alongside the original Caped Crusader – in a constantly evolving narrative. Due for release at the tail-end of 2013, it could give Valve's upcoming effort, *Dota 2*, some fierce competition.

GAME DEV STORY

with Q-Games' James Mielke



Birth Of A BitSummit



When you ask someone about the indie games scene in the West – like *Sword & Sworcery, Fez, Dyad, Cart Life, FTL*, etc, – you'll know that it's vibrant, high profile, and more often than not, very successful. Japan's independent development 'scene', if it can be called that, exists, but has been mostly invisible to all but the most dedicated fans, for many reasons. Part of this is due to unfair definitions of what constitutes an 'indie' developer. In the West we're accustomed to thinking an indie developer is made up of no more than a handful of artists, musicians, and programmers, who weld together something delightful, against all odds, through maxed-out credit cards, government grants, IGF awards, and crowd-funding. But in Japan, a long-running, critically-acclaimed independent developer, like Treasure, isn't afforded the same consideration or grouping, perhaps because they're a more established company with a number of high-profile successes, like *Ikaruga* or *Guardian Heroes* to their name. Maybe it's also because most of their games are published by large game publishers, like Sega, so they're not seen as being truly independent.

Still, Japan has its fair share of independent developers; they're just not as organised or collaborative as indies in the West, and along with that, the challenges of language barriers, lack of media contacts, and no real understanding of publishing options and portals like Steam and Good Old Games makes it truly challenging for the Japanese indie game maker to raise awareness of their games. Enter BitSummit. I started BitSummit, with the help of my employer, Q-Games, to help raise awareness of Japanese game developers, and to hopefully get them to discover each other and maybe let this natural chemistry do its work. Japanese game devs don't usually collaborate with each other like Western indies do. In the West, programmers in Canada might work with artists in California and designers in Chicago, while the music is composed in Sweden. In Japan you often see cross-collaborations among the larger publishers, who routinely create IP mash-ups filled with fan service. But the Japanese indies don't often interact like that. So with BitSummit, the concept was simple: put many devs in a room together, with both Japanese and Western media, along with some middleware providers and sponsors like Epic Games and Unity, and see what happens.

> I'm starting to think that what the Japanese gaming industry needs to experience at this point is something of an implosion, and a rebirth

Valve was a big part of BitSummit's eventual success. We had but three months to assemble the whole event, and having Valve on board to give a special presentation meant that the devs would come. Having the devs on board – along with special guests like *Deadly Premonition*'s director, 'Swery,' and *Tokyo Jungle*'s director, Yohei Kataoka – meant that the media would show up. Having the media committed to attending meant the sponsors would support BitSummit. Once we had all cylinders firing, the Japanese media, like Famitsu and IGDA's Japanese division, meant that we blew past our original headcount by almost 200 per cent.

Our event, which featured as much spit and polish as our budget allowed, was held in a concert hall in Kyoto, featuring a half dozen or so guest presentations tailored to supporting the efforts and inspiration of Japanese indie devs, and offered all the bells, whistles, and accoutrement associated with a bona fide gaming event: posters, T-shirts designed by Nintendo licensee, King of Games, custom USB 8GB wristbands, CG-rendered mascot reels, a highlights trailer, and a special musical performance by chiptune superstar, Professor Sakamoto. There had never been an event like this in Japan before; nothing as big or containing as many indie devs in one place. Plus, the level of interaction amongst the developers was surprising and encouraging. More than a few games, including Daisuke Amaya's '*Gero Blaster*' (he of *Cave Story* fame) made their debut at BitSummit.

BitSummit was successful enough that the Kyoto government heard about it and decided that they wanted to support the next iteration of the event, and all of our sponsors want to return. Most importantly, a large number of the invitees that declined to attend the first one for whatever reason, have already inquired about attending the next one. If that doesn't send the right signal, I don't know what does.

Having spoken with one of my key organisational partners, Ben Judd (former Capcom producer), said to me that BitSummit could be as important to Japan as GDC is in the West. I can say we're a long way off from hosting 30,000 people at a gaming event like this in Kyoto, but if we can at least be the pebble on top of the hill that starts an avalanche, that'll be good enough for me.

James Mielke is a producer at Q-Games

BIT.SUMMIT.MMXIII

BIT.SUMMIT
MMXIII

BITSUMMIT II: THE SUMMIT STRIKES BACK?

■ NOW THAT THE first BitSummit was a resounding and surprising success, we can now look to the future of the event. The first BitSummit was subtitled 'MMXIII' (i.e. 2013), but I don't think we'll stick to that convention. We will retain the basic elements of the event – our mascot Bit King, the indie focus, and keep it invite-only – but mix up the theme moving forward. I expect we will simply call the follow-up event 'BitSummit II.' There may or may not be a subtitle involved, but it won't be Roman numerals. I may also shift the elegant 2D art created for the first one in favour of a grittier, 3D treatment, a la *Pacific Rim*. The reasoning is to keep it fresh and exciting by doing unexpected things. That is, after all, what makes indie games so much fun, so I believe we should apply the same ethos to the treatment of our event.





NEXT-GEN FEATURE

COMBAT EVOLVED

DICE HAS UNVEILED ITS BOLD VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF BATTLEFIELD, BUT CAN IT SUCCEED ON BOTH SINGLE AND MULTIPLAYER FRONTS? WE SPOKE TO THE DEVELOPER TO FIND OUT

The *Battlefield* brand has always been synonymous with multiplayer, but we've seen developer DICE put more resources into developing single-player with every passing iteration of the franchise. It came to a head with 2011's *Battlefield 3*. DICE came out with its very own *Call Of Duty* beater, promising a single-player brimming with as much bombast and freedom as its renowned multiplayer. But despite the developer's best efforts, the final release featured one of the most forgettable single-player campaigns of the year.

While many expected (and some secretly hoped) that the single-player would be left on the cutting room floor when *Battlefield 4* was announced, the developer stood tall and revealed a breathtaking glimpse into the future of first-person shooters; a 17-minute demonstration that highlighted the power of the newly christened Frostbite 3 Engine, as well as the studio's ongoing commitment to developing a single-player campaign with a heart. Slicing away the bombast and showmanship *Battlefield 3* touted so proudly, *Battlefield 4*'s introduction to the world was, at least in its opening beats, a sombre occasion led by an Eighties power ballad.

"I don't want to die to this song," a weary voice mutters as Bonnie Tyler's *Total Eclipse Of The Heart* immediately arrests your attention. The camera fades into a submerged SUV sinking deeper into the ocean, four battle-fatigued soldiers argue about their plan of escape. A cocked magnum is pointed at a window and the echoes of a gunshot take us ten hours back to before their ordeal began.

THERE ARE SO MANY DIFFERENT TYPES OF PLAYERS AND DIFFERENT TYPES OF THINGS YOU CAN DO WITH ***BATTLEFIELD***. It means different things to different players, so I think there are so many games you could make inside this franchise that could still be *Battlefield*," considers single-player director Stefan Strandberg. "Ultimately, we know the popularity of our game comes from our great multiplayer and we are trying to deeply analyse what those things are in terms of gameplay and how those moments appear and try to incorporate as much of that as possible [into the single-player experience]."

Over the course of the 17-minute demonstration we are taken on a journey with a four-man squad, desperately trying to escape Baku after an Intel insertion goes awry. The first mission of the game tells a lot about DICE's commitment to single-player: instead of trying to replicate *Modern Warfare*'s corridor-driven antics, the developer is moving combat into the open as it attempts to bridge the gap between single and multiplayer experiences.

"The key thing here is we're extremely proud of *Battlefield 3* and we learnt so much in how to relay a story and to get the characters to relate. But at the same time, we felt afterwards that if there's one thing we messed up on then it was that extra *Battlefield* flavour. The things that we're known for in multiplayer – with the destruction, with the sandbox," says creative director Lars Gustavsson. This is a thought echoed by Strandberg, who is eager to bring the freedom of multiplayer into the solo space. "Ultimately, the freedom allowed inside multiplayer, the player autonomy and self-authored stories, come from multiplayer being multiplayer. It's that kind of gameplay we really try to get in there, but we also try to tell a story. This time we tried to make it – and it's an oxymoron to say it – but the ultimate compromise.

"So you want to tell a story and you have to, at certain points, have chokepoints to tell a story," Strandberg continues. "We provide a goal, and then we have this sort of playground that will lead you to that goal, but inside those playgrounds is where we can cater for those self-authored experiences where you improvise on the battlefield, and you can use vehicles and destruction – however you want to play. We are trying to make a game where these things can coexist, where one thing doesn't exclude the other. There's huge potential, and we are trying as much as we can to incorporate that kind of gameplay combined with that kind of storytelling."

DICE is certainly no stranger to bridging the gap between storytelling and multiplayer. 2010's *Bad Company 2* revealed the studio's humorous side, as well as its capacity to weave an engaging narrative. It's a trait the developer is clearly trying to replicate in *Battlefield 4*, and as the demonstration video flashes back to sun-soaked dilapidation in the heart of Baku, Azerbaijan, we are introduced to the various members of the Tombstone squad.

Taking the role of 'Recker', we are quickly introduced to the rest of the team, combat medic 'Pac' and Staff Sergeant Dunn, before engaging in an intense gunfight against Russian special forces in a

IMPORTANCE OF DLC

★ DLC is an important way for developers to increase the life expectancy of a game, and DICE is already starting to think about its release schedule. Pre-ordering the game will guarantee you a 'Premium Expansion Pack' down the road, and while no details on its specifics were available, we did speak with DICE director Lars Gustavsson on the importance for such releases. "With *1942*, we had two expansion packs and then we've been continuing. We're always seeing a desire to play more and to be honest people are still playing *Battlefield 1942* and *Battlefield 2*. So I wouldn't really know what it would be if we hadn't done it. The only thing I know is that people seem to appreciate it. So I would say it's definitely important. If you like the game and you want more variety, I think the team did a great job... not only here are more maps but here's different flavours. Here's Aftermath. Here's End Game. Here's Close Quarters."

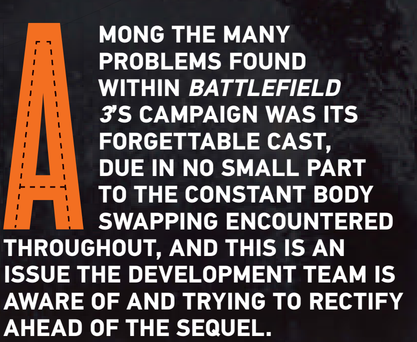
★ FROSTBITE 3 ENGINE SEEMS TO BE WORKING WONDERS WITH CURRENT GENERATION TECHNOLOGY; THE LIGHTING IN PARTICULAR IS UNLIKE ANYTHING THAT WE HAVE SEEN BEFORE.

★ DICE CONFIRMED THAT A WII U ITERATION OF *BATTLEFIELD 4* IS UNLIKELY DUE TO DIFFICULTIES IN SCALING AND TESTING THE ENGINE ON DIFFERENT PLATFORMS.

★ AS ALWAYS, DICE HAS RE-CREATED SOME GORGEOUS-LOOKING FIREARMS IN *BATTLEFIELD 4*, AND WHILE *CALL OF DUTY* IS HAPPY TO BASK IN THE RIDICULOUS, *BATTLEFIELD* IS STILL STRIVING FOR GREATER LEVELS OF REALISM.

pedestrian-packed street to secure the safety of 'Irish', the final member of the insertion squad. This tight-knit team will, throughout the first mission at least, be your brothers in arms.

★



A MONG THE MANY PROBLEMS FOUND WITHIN *BATTLEFIELD 3*'S CAMPAIGN WAS ITS FORGETTABLE CAST, DUE IN NO SMALL PART TO THE CONSTANT BODY SWAPPING ENCOUNTERED THROUGHOUT, AND THIS IS AN ISSUE THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM IS AWARE OF AND TRYING TO RECTIFY AHEAD OF THE SEQUEL.

"Having a consistent group of people around you, rather than the character jumping we did in *Battlefield 3,* allows for, naturally, a better understanding of your character," says Strandberg. It sounds like a lesson learned from *Bad Company,* though Strandberg is more than happy to admit that the studio is aiming to re-create the same inclusive feeling, while taking aim at an altogether separate tone. "When it comes to tone we are exploring another territory. *Bad Company* was a little bit on the comedy side of things, which was a great relief," he says. "Depending on the conditions, humour is a way of coping with fear. These are things we are actually exploring at this very moment, when we are doing our recording."

"WE SET THAT AS A MANTRA WHEN WE BEGAN THIS GAME, TO REALLY ALLOW THE PLAYER TO BE IN CONTROL AT ALL TIMES" STEFAN STRANDBERG

With *Battlefield 4*, DICE is replicating the setup of many triple-A studios, like Naughty Dog and Eidos Montreal, by treating production like that of a movie studio. Motion capture is being done by Hollywood actors instead of internal developers – the production from movement to voice is being captured in the most natural way possible.

"We are doing real mo-cap shoots with real actors on the floor. So with the *Bad Company* series, for example, it was recorded with the four of them in a booth, sitting around a microphone with a piece of paper in their hands. Now we

8 STEPS TO BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL SINGLE-PLAYER

1 IN GOOD COMPANY

■ *BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY* showed that DICE had the ability and talent to deliver an engaging narrative. Dropping the body-hopping found in *Medal Of Honor* and *Call Of Duty, Bad Company* proved once and for all that everything – even single-player – is better with dependable friends by your side.

2 PLAYER AGENCY

■ *SPEC OPS: THE Line* dealt with a lot of difficult themes for a shooter, and naturally the concepts of player agency and violence was left open to discussion. DICE would do well to let players question their place in the middle of a battlefield, instead of blindly following orders along a linear path.

3 EMBRACING MULTIPLAYER

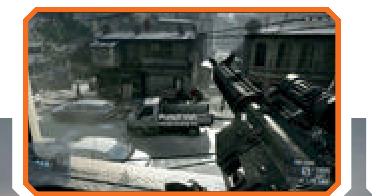
■ *BATTLEFIELD* IS KNOWN for its fantastic multiplayer – but it doesn't have to be separated from the single-player show. Opening up the battlefields, letting players decide how they tackle a situation (via land, air or sea) would go a long way to create an experience *Call Of Duty* could never compete with.

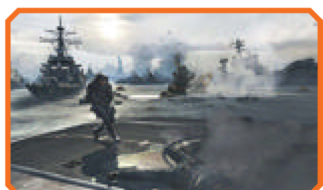
4 COD FACTOR

■ YOU MIGHT NOT want to admit it, but *Call Of Duty* is still wearing the crown when it comes to wartime FPS games. *Call Of Duty* embraces what it does best, delivering an action-heavy big blockbuster spectacle every year. DICE will need to embrace *BF4*'s core concepts fully if it wants to compete.

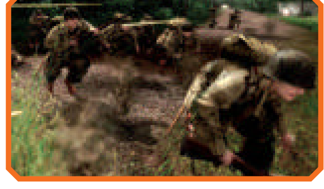




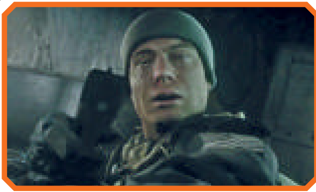












5 BROTHERS IN ARMS

■ Gearbox defined the way squads controlled in the battlefield with *Brothers In Arms*, and rival shooters have been catching up since. *Battlefield 4*, however, is implementing a similar system, whereby you can order your squad to flank, suppress and assault the enemy on the fly. It's yet another feature that its rival could never offer.

6 LENGTH IS EVERYTHING

■ IT DOESN'T MATTER what you might be told otherwise: length counts for a lot in life. As big-budget FPS games get shorter, you only have to look towards the likes of *Half-Life 2* and *BioShock* that span the 10+ hour mark while still maintaining a tight narrative and universal acclaim. Imagine a war FPS longer than four hours…

7 AROUND THE WORLD

■ AN ISSUE FOUND in most modern FPS games is the lack of a straight narrative, as you body swap endlessly around the world. It often leaves the player without a care for the death merchant they are operating. *Battlefield 4* is apparently ditching the geopolitics and delivering a cohesive story – it'll be better for it.

8 A LIKEABLE CHARACTER

■ TAKING THE ROLE of 'Recker' in *Battlefield 4*, DICE is striving to introduce a human face into the bloody face of war. By utilising actors and motion capture, the studio is taking aim at a human story, and the first step is in creating a character we can relate with as players. Expect this to be the most realistic depiction of war to grace a game.

are doing a real shoot as if it was a movie and all of its physical properties of recording on stage with an actor," Strandberg says, adding: "We do proper rehearsals and we explore what the actors can give us and in return we give them the freedom to work with the themes. So we put them in certain circumstances and in certain conditions and we can explore what that would mean to them. This time around we are really trying to see how this feeds into our storytelling, to have *them* contribute more than if it were just wrote on a piece of paper. Instead, we are going, 'you're in a sinking car, what the f*** would you do?' It's a playful thing rather than a confined predetermined scene."

On the surface *Battlefield 4*'s reveal was incredibly impressive. Its attention to detail was second to none, though that doesn't mean eyebrows weren't raised throughout the presentation. Despite DICE's assertions otherwise, it's hard not to conjure memories of *Battlefield 3*'s torturous campaign. Many sections of the demo seem to rip control away from the player; frustrating QTE sections replaced with quiet submission as we slip through a crumbling building and legs are amputated without any real cause for concern. There's no doubting its physical fidelity, but the tease has left many questions awkwardly unanswered. DICE assures us it has been listening to player feedback and is eager to move away from the linear, driven environments that dominated its predecessor, but much of Recker's adventures through Baku looked like they were on a predetermined path.

"I really want to show them that there is more than that," replies Strandberg in response to whether *Battlefield 4* would convince disgruntled players to try the campaign instead of diving into multiplayer. "I know there is a certain fatigue of modern shooters, but we have so many more themes and places to explore and so much going for the character arc so I really want them to give that a try. The events themselves are cinematic; like you are in a collapsing building for example, but you are always in control there – to the boundaries of the physical properties of the scene. We set that as a mantra when we began this game, to really allow the player to be in control at all times.

"Of course, there are several drawbacks with that in terms of the storytelling," he adds. "But again, I think Valve has proved that several times – if the player is free to do what he or she wants it's fine; it's more important that the player feels like they are in control. We don't ever cut and say, 'Look, now there's a passive cut-scene, sit back and relax.' We want to keep you on your toes and have you inside the scene instead of being a passive bystander."

★

STRANDBERG IS NO ROOKIE – A VETERAN OF THE *BATTLEFIELD* DESIGN TEAM, HE UNDERSTANDS BETTER THAN ANYONE THE DEMANDS OF BALANCING STORY AND GAMEPLAY. He's honest about those demands, admitting that even with *Battlefield* – a series that's strongest when 64 players are donning a variety of vehicles and diving into all out war – will still need to embrace linearity to deliver a story, though it doesn't have to be a word we fear. "[Of course] there are certain parts that are linear," he says. "That doesn't mean you always have less choice. *BioShock* showed that – it's quite a linear game, but it's not a problem. You can create interesting gameplay in linear sections if you need to tell a story. I think it's the mix of these things, when you are in a linear segment and then you're rewarded with a playground to play around with. It's the contrast between that and being open. That's what's truly interesting. At a certain

DIRECT SEQUEL

★ DESPITE ITS problems, we can't ignore that there is a large fan base for *Battlefield 3*'s campaign. DICE is taking *4* in another direction, but that doesn't mean we won't see some returning characters along the way. "*Battlefield 4* is set in the same universe as *Battlefield 3* [and] some characters will come back. The chopper pilot from the demo, she is called Jennifer Hawken, she's actually the co-pilot you are playing in the Going Hunting level," confirmed Strandberg, though, as the trailer confirms, she quickly dies – crashing a helicopter into a building the Tombstone squad is positioned on. "We build on the same universe. The events that took place, they are going to be there – I don't think you have to have played *BF3*. Despite Hawken dying early on, the end of the presentation reveals another female voice offering assistance to Recker – can we expect a greater female presence in single-player? Or perhaps playable female characters in multiplayer for the first time?



"WE DON'T WANT TO MAKE A GAME [AND] HAVE GEOPOLITICS PROPELLING THE STORY, WE WANT THE CHARACTERS TO BE THE CENTRE" STEFAN STRANDBERG

pace you change the environment or you change the circumstances [and] conditions for the player. So I think, in terms of space, it's not just linearity – it's just one axis of how a player would perceive a certain environment. You could feel isolated in a vast mountain range and you could feel isolated in a prison cell – it's the same emotion but the spaces are different."



THIS IS AN IDEA THAT TOBIAS DAHL, *BATTLEFIELD 4* SINGLE-PLAYER PRODUCER, AGREES WITH, REFLECTING ON PREVIOUS ITERATIONS IN THE FRANCHISE TO EMPHASISE DICE'S COMMITMENT TO CREATING A BACKDROP VAST IN SCOPE BUT SMALLER IN SCALE. "Looking at *Bad Company 1*, for instance, we had vast landscapes and you could drive forever in your car and then suddenly go into a village with a couple of AIs in it, but you couldn't do anything in it," he states. "It kind of felt lonely actually from time to time. We don't have problems with the technology that we have to build huge landscapes, it's just a question of if that's what we want to tell or not. We'd rather propel the story through certain points and then open up again and give access to the playfulness, and the joy of using the huge toolbox that we use for multiplayer."

Strandberg continues, highlighting the difficulties in producing a tight narrative in a modern warfare setting. "The contrast is what's interesting. We have huge maps in single-player, but there are places in single-player that take place in smaller spaces, naturally," he says. "There are places in our game where the *Battlefield* signature gameplay fits, but [you have to remember], there is indoor combat in our multiplayer as well, with corridors." He laughs, realising the difficulty at hand in trying to please both single and multiplayer fans.

★ OPENING WITH THE SOMBRE TONES OF BONNIE TYLER AND CLOSING WITH THE CRESCENDO OF A GUNSHOT BLAST, THE *BATTLEFIELD 4* TRAILER IS DRAMATIC FROM START TO FINISH.

"WE WANT YOU TO CREATE AN EXPERIENCE AND STORY YOURSELF. SO HOPEFULLY THEY BLEND SEAMLESSLY TOGETHER AND YOU STOP CARING ABOUT WHICH ONE IS WHICH" LARS GUSTAVSSON

Lars Gustavsson interjects to highlight the importance of player agency. "Think back to that open construction site," he enthuses. "You can use the vehicle, you can come at it, you can use the different tools that are available. So it's really up to you to play your story while, at certain times, it's a moment that we want you to experience. So we're not shying away from the fact we want to tell a story at the same time. We want you to create an experience and story yourself. So hopefully they blend seamlessly together and you stop caring about which is which, because you're in for the journey."

None of this would be possible without the technology powering *Battlefield*'s impressive showing. The Frostbite Engine 3 has been developed by DICE with next-generation shooters in mind, and the results are simply stunning.

"The cool thing about Frostbite is that *Battlefield* is one of the bigger games using the technology, and we are the ones pushing [it]," suggests Dahl. "In that regard we are always pushing the technology, so instead of using an external engine we can actually talk with the Frostbite team and let them know our goals and what we want to have there so we can achieve what we want to achieve. Frostbite is what we need it to be, and that is a super-powerful position for us to be in while we develop the game. It's like being a spoilt child before Christmas – whatever you point at your parents will get you."

"It's the dynamic battlefield that we can push so much further," adds Gustavsson. "Just being able to build this big toolbox for the player to play within. We can remove a lot of the obstacles for you to be able to tie in and connect with the digital actors. I'm super pleased with how far we managed to get with *Battlefield 3*. People said a lot of positive things, but now we've taken it so much further. Hopefully the connection with you and the actors will be so much tighter. I feel that we are in a really good place."

Despite *Battlefield 4*'s incredibly polished showing – from the unnerving serenity of a construction site basking in a dust storm to the horrors found within a crumbling building – it's hard to believe DICE's assertion that this is a current generation release. The studio is only talking about Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and, obviously, 'high-end' PC so far – though with Sony making such a large effort to model the PlayStation 4's architecture on that of a PC, we imagine it won't be long before we see the title go cross-generation. With E3 but a few weeks away, and an announcement from Microsoft concerning next-gen imminent, all we can do is wildly anticipate seeing the Frostbite engine pushing the next generation of systems from the off.

"We cannot really comment on the next-gen consoles, but in regards to scalability, it's



something that we are used to," Dahl coyly states. "We have always worked on a broad scale of hardware in regards to consoles up to high-end PCs. We have a lot of people that are constantly trying to achieve the exact same feeling and exact same visual look as good as we can, independent of what hardware we have. It's of course one of the biggest things we asked for [in Frostbite]. Of course, yes, we want all of the new cool features, but we need to have them working on all the different platforms. That's very important for us; we're not really interested in shipping different games on different platforms. We want the experience for the players to be what it is independent of the platform."

★

DESPITE DAHL'S ASSERTION THAT THE ENGINE IS SCALABLE, MUCH HAS BEEN SAID IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE UNVEILING CONCERNING THE WII U. Previous interviews with DICE's Patrick Bach have outright ruled against the Frostbite 3 engine running on Nintendo's system, though Dahl's a little more open-minded, saying they would consider any platform as long as the game performed to DICE's standards.

"Yes I would argue that this is the case," he says. "We have to have a limitation on what we can do. Also, it's a huge effort for the team to, you know, for whatever changes or additions you make to the game to test them on all the different platforms – that's a big time hog. It's a huge effort for us to develop on different platforms; it would be very easy for us to just develop on one platform – so that's part of the equation actually."

The question of whether DICE can deliver on its promises this time around won't be answered until autumn 2013, but this first showing certainly inspires a lot of hope. The 17-minute presentation displayed the studio's dedication to cinematography and character-led drama without it impeding immediate design. While the studio is reluctant to talk about multiplayer, we can already see elements that will carry from single to multi – leaderboards and challenges ping throughout the firefights, destructible environments look better than ever before, and the depth of environments looks more impressive than it did previously.

Of course, this is all running on current-generation technology; we can barely imagine how the technology will scale to meet the offerings of Sony and Microsoft. From character models to beautiful textures and incredible draw distances – *Battlefield 4* is raising the stakes on every expectation we have of war shooters.

Can DICE deliver on the promises it has already made with this impressive showing? That's hard to say, but we can't to get hands-on with the studio's startling vision for the next generation of first-person shooters.

Battlefield 4 is currently confirmed for release on Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC for autumn 2013.

BETTER WITH FRIENDS

★ FOLLOWING THE POOR reception of *Battlefield 3*'s campaign and the success of *Battlefield 1943*'s *release*, the argument could be made for DICE to drop *Battlefield*'s single-player altogether. Lars Gustavsson, director of DICE, isn't sure it's a viable option. "*Battlefield 1943* was multiplayer only. It was downloadable only. If you would frame it that way and set expectations that way, maybe it would be. We're passionate about it… I think overall great games come from people who have the dedication to say we believe in this. We believe this is going to be a great experience. We have chosen to focus on this. And not try to do everything just because we think it's the right thing. So if we did it and we did the right packaging, maybe it could work. But right now we're still extremely passionate about building a single-player experience and making it… the best summary for me would be to see that it's one whole product. It's all *Battlefield*."

★ DICE WOULDN'T TALK ABOUT ITS VISION FOR *BATTLEFIELD 4*'S MULTIPLAYER, THOUGH IT WAS EAGER TO TELL US THAT MANY FEATURES WILL BLEED INTO THE SINGLE-PLAYER CAMPAIGN.



"[It] opened my eyes to multiplayer gaming and big open worlds and what a jerk I could be"
KIP KATSARELIS, MAXIS



WHY I ♥...

Ultima Online

KIP KATSARELIS, MAXIS

“*Ultima Online* was the game for me that opened my eyes to multiplayer gaming and big open worlds and what a jerk I could be. It was this other reality and I’m still to this day a big fan of MMOs and that was the one. I’m always looking for that experience that *Ultima* gave me and there are things about it that are so hardcore that games today just don’t have. I’m constantly on the search for that magic.”



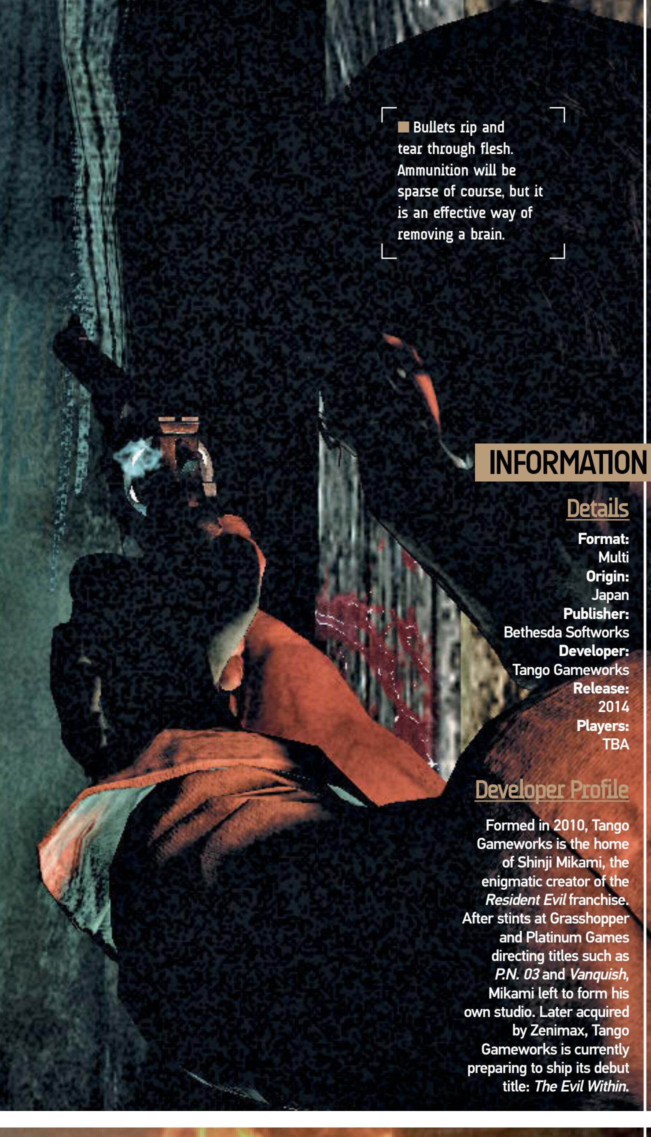
DISTORTED VISIONS

THE LIVE-ACTION teaser for *The Evil Within* revealed Shinji Mikami's vision for the future of horror games: twisted visions through the dark, females drowning in blood and multi-limbed antagonists crawling through the halls of an asylum. It's a disturbing trailer to say the least, and gives a fantastic indication of what to expect from *The Evil Within* when it launches in 2014 for Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC and next-generation consoles. The game's screens and early footage is basking in genuine terror, bodies wrapped in barbed wire and antagonists with tentacle-filled safes attached to their heads evoke the psychological horrors of *Silent Hill 2* more so than *Resident Evil*, but it's clear Mikami is prepared to take unsuspecting gamers down the rabbit hole – desperate to provide scares that have abandoned the industry entirely.

When you arrive on the scene, the asylum is deserted. Empty police cars litter the car park, though no sign of a struggle is present, an ominous opening chapter.

Tango Softworks has produced some truly terrifying enemy designs; this multi-limbed antagonist dripping in blood is enough for us to curl up in fear.

Sebastian's movement and animation changes depending on whether enemies are nearby, it should go a long way to evoke fear and concern in players' hearts as we take part in the detective's unravelling situation.



Bullets rip and tear through flesh. Ammunition will be sparse of course, but it is an effective way of removing a brain.

The Evil Within

CONCEPT The creator of *Resident Evil* returns to the genre he helped define, with new horror franchise *The Evil Within*.

The architect of horror returns

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Developer: Tango Gameworks
Release: 2014
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

Formed in 2010, Tango Gameworks is the home of Shinji Mikami, the enigmatic creator of the *Resident Evil* franchise. After stints at Grasshopper and Platinum Games directing titles such as *P.N. 03* and *Vanquish*, Mikami left to form his own studio. Later acquired by Zenimax, Tango Gameworks is currently preparing to ship its debut title: *The Evil Within*.



Developer History

Vanquish
2010 [Multi]
Resident Evil 4
2005 [GC, PS2]
P.N.03
2003 [GC]
Dino Crisis
1999 [PS1]
Resident Evil
1996 [PS1]

High Point

Creeping through the empty halls of the Spencer Mansion, all is quiet… until a mutilated dog jumps through the window and scares the living hell out of everyone that dares sit down with *Resident Evil*.

Somewhere along the way, gamers stopped caring about survival-horror. The late Nineties were awash with fantastic new franchises, built to inspire fear in every player that dared pick up a controller. The current generation of consoles has seen plenty of new horror IPs come and go. *Dead Space* and *Condemned* are two of note – though, ultimately, both lost their way.

For Shinji Mikami this simply isn't good enough. The creator of seminal horror series *Resident Evil* is returning to the genre he once helped pioneer with *The Evil Within*, a daring new third-person survival-horror. The debut title from his Tokyo-based Tango Gameworks studio, Mikami has made his intentions clear from the outset – the genre is caught in a rut, and he's eager to return it to its former glory, though that might be easier said than done.

We've seen the genre steadily drift away from 'survival', most developers opting instead to merge horror with action to near universally disastrous results. Recent iterations of *Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill* and *Alone In The Dark* have all struggled to create engaging experiences.

The Evil Within seems to be built on the core tenets of what we remember real horror to be. Players will take on the role of detective Sebastian as he's called into investigate a multiple homicide at an insane asylum. The mental hospital will act as the epicentre to much of the mystery on hand, providing plenty of hallowed hallways to creep through, and perhaps acting as the conduit to another twisted world entirely.

The sublime *Resident Evil 4* was Mikami's last foray into the genre, and *The Evil Within* looks to adopt its cinematic approach to storytelling. The camera hangs low behind Sebastian, perched over his shoulder, giving a wide view of his surroundings. It brings an overbearing creepiness to the title's grounded design tone.

The sterilised white corridors of the hospital are in stark contrast to the bloodstained meat lockers hidden within its depths. It's here where much of the game's prologue takes place as Sebastian wakes up hanging in a living hell after a struggle above, his investigation taking a determined twist towards the supernatural.

A hulking butcher patrols the locker, mutilating and basking in the blood of the corpses of doctors and police officers Sebastian was called in to find. The Butcher evokes memories of *Resident Evil 3*'s Nemesis with an air of *Silent Hill* about him – the only option is to run from his grasp.

/// If any director is going to be a slave to pushing horror throughout every aspect of design, it's Mikami. As Sebastian begins to encounter warped visions of his world, he eventually finds himself whisked out of the asylum into a *Twin Peaks*-like town plagued by mutilated undead-esque enemies – it seems Mikami's walking a delicate line between psychological and confrontational horror.

A glance towards *The Evil Within*'s logo reveals a brain entangled in barbed wire with the spinal cord replaced by what looks like the exterior of the asylum. It evokes the same design tone of Joss Whedon's *Cabin In The Woods*, a film that took genre tropes and happily danced around them to create a cerebral experience for the horror aficionado. We can only assume Mikami's vision is wrapped in the same ideals – it's becoming harder to scare players desensitised by years of mediocre horror games and torture porn movies.

> "Shinji Mikami, the father of survival horror, is back to direct The Evil Within"
> TANGO SOFTWORKS – PRESS RELEASE

As Sebastian's struggle against an undead threat in the town comes to a head, the environments begin to wildly warp and shift beneath his feet, before a river of blood washes over the detective transporting him back into the halls of the asylum – *The Evil Within* is going to hinge on unravelling the spectres of the mind as much as it is going to provide visceral scares.

Until we get hands on with it we won't know for certain how successful Mikami has been in taking us back to the glory days of survival-horror, but it certainly looks like he is determined to return players to a time when turning a corner was met with a cautionary pause.

■ Above: While Gabriel has grown weak during his hiding, it doesn't seem to have affected his ability to smack bad guys around.



MIRROR OF FATE – ON

RELEASED EARLIER in the year, *Lords Of Shadow – Mirror Of Fate* on the 3DS was an enjoyable stopgap between the two console entries, even if it failed to match the high standards of MercurySteam's original. Asked to reflect on the handheld entry, Konami's Dave Cox enthuses about the end product. "We're very proud of it," he says. "It is our contribution to the series' handheld dynasty and has been incredibly well received. It was always intended as a tangential addition to the *Lords Of Shadow* range, however. It is a game that will reward those that plays all three, but will not affect anyone who will just join the fun in *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2*."

■ Above: What's a man to do when he's stuck alone in his castle for centuries? Drink, apparently. Right: In classic videogame style, Gabriel has been stripped of the majority of his Prince of Darkness powers early in the game, requiring players to battle through Satan's legions before he can return to his full strength.



Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2

CONCEPT ■ Gabriel Belmont is now Dracula, which means he has the Dark Lord's arsenal at his disposal as he once again battles against Satan's minions.

Bat to the future

Not to suggest any negativity associated with DLC, but over the past few years it has been impossible to overlook the sheer number of studios willingly trimming expendable content and crafting micro-expansions for a pre-determined content drop later down the line. It has become such the norm, that the original *Lords Of Shadow*'s intensely hefty single-player campaign landed as something of a surprise for the majority of gamers unused to such time-sapping adventures. Did developer MercurySteam not get the memo?

It remains a peculiar area of criticism that Konami's Dave Cox addressed when talking with **games™** about the upcoming sequel. "I think, in these days of games that are over in ten hours, people were surprised when two Titans came and they were still nowhere near the end of the game," he says. "We never wanted to make a game that followed the tedious level/level/boss/level/level/boss pattern. We wanted a game where one minute you were fighting a werewolf in the mud, then fighting a stone titan, before heading into the various rooms of a huge castle. We're telling a story, so why be predictable?"

Why indeed? The climax of *Lords Of Shadow* can lay claim as one of the more shocking temporal rug pulls of this generation (surpassed recently by *that* city in the sky), and the twist of Gabriel living in the modern day as Dracula implied that an inevitable sequel would dispose of the familiar gothic cathedrals in favour of a contemporary urban sprawl.

///"We say internally, that the city is as an important character as anything else in the game," states Cox. "We have created a modern, yet somehow still Gothic, modern day city, with inhabitants, traffic, etc – and Gabriel can go anywhere in it. We've always felt that in some games you are ushered too strictly and not allowed to experience and enjoy the locations. *Lords Of Shadow 2* will offer linear missions, but we want people to revisit parts of the city to perhaps look for items that they previously couldn't get to as they lacked the relevant abilities. As Gabriel grows in power, though, so they can return to these places and collect or see things they may have missed. The city is the thing that gives the game its scale, so it is absolutely vital that it is a believable place. One thing I will say this is not a city you have seen before. It's very much a city that feels like it belongs in the *Castlevania* universe. It's an imagined city in an imagined universe."

And, as is the case with many sequels, expansion plays an important part. MercurySteam itself developed *Lords Of Shadow 2* and the 3DS offshoot *Lords Of Shadow – Mirror Of Fate* concurrently, requiring the studio to bolster its internal team, which was split between the two projects. It also became evident early in development that the studio would need to start from scratch and craft a new engine to fully realise the scope of its ambitions for the sequel. "We wanted a flowing camera that could be moved freely, and a sense of greater scale to compound the epic feeling that Dracula is a part of a believable and immersive city," Cox says emphatically. "The old engine wouldn't have been able to cope, so we had to employ a great number of new people to add to the talent pool, with artists from *Mirror Of Fate* moving over to *Lords Of Shadow 2* as the 3DS game came to an end."

Unlike the 3DS game, the story will be focused on Gabriel, exploring the eternal struggle between good and evil (that old chestnut). However, his transformation into the mightiest of bloodsuckers leads **games™** to our final point: how MercurySteam intends to imagine Dracula as a playable character without feeling overpowered. "By stripping him of his powers!" reveals Cox. "Gabriel starts the game with a full gamut of vampiric powers, but – for reasons that are explored in the opening – is sent to modern day times, but without his powers. He is still capable of certain things which give him an advantage over mortal man, but he will need to adapt and expand his powers to cater for the, shall we say… demonic, foes he faces."

> "We say, internally, that the city is as an important character as anything else in the game"
>
> DAVE COX KONAMI

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Spain
Publisher: Konami
Developer: MercurySteam
Release: TBA 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

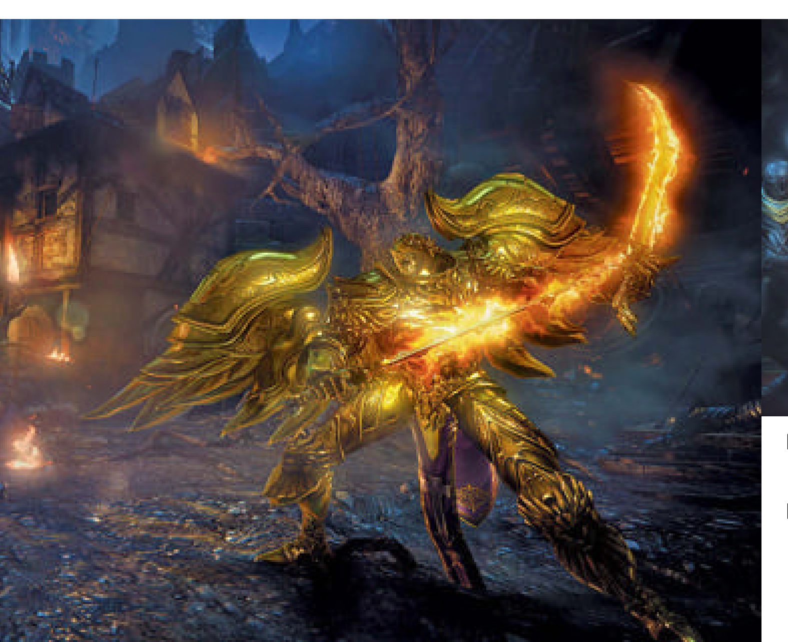
The Spanish studio rose to prominence after the moderate success of *Clive Barker's Jericho*, before collaborating with Konami on 2010's *Castlevania* reboot.

Developer History

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow – Mirror Of Fate **2013 [3DS]**
Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow **2010 [Multi]**
Clive Barker's Jericho **2007 [Multi]**
American McGee Presents: Scrapland **2004 [Multi]**

High Point

MercurySteam achieved what many thought impossible with the original *Lords Of Shadow*: galvanising a moribund license with a renewed relevance.





■ Above: Asked whether there have been internal discussions about releasing *Lords Of Shadows 2* on next-generation consoles, Konami's Dave Cox answered simply: "We started our story on 360 and PS3, and it is logical it ends there."



The Mighty Quest For Epic Loot

CONCEPT ■ Free-to-play hack-and-slash/defence game in which you build a floating castle and raid other people's floating castles for stores of gold with which to improve your castle. Which floats.

Five things you'll need to do to become ruler of Opulencia

Ubisoft's upcoming free-to-play title throws players into the world of Opulencia, a magical kingdom that operates on a loot-based economy; all the inhabitants continually raid the strongholds of others, earning gold which they then spend on their own stronghold to make it harder to raid. The combination of *Diablo*-style hack-and-slash with *Dungeon Keeper*-style base building makes for an interesting experience – especially when, as the focus on asynchronous multiplayer is being pushed to the forefront to encourage repeat business, the castles you're raiding on a daily basis are those of your friends.

The preview session was undeniably fun but left us feeling concerned that there's not quite enough to do here – after an hour or two of play, we were fighting the same enemies in near-identical castles across the board. But perhaps the experience is improved once you're online with your friends and family or jostling for control of regional leaderboards. Still, here's what we learned:

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC
Players: Massively multiplayer

Developer Profile

Ubisoft Montreal is, at the moment, best known for its work on the *Assassin's Creed* series – but it's responsible for all of *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* and *Splinter Cell*, *Prince Of Persia* and *Far Cry*, too. *TMQFEL* is its first foray into the free-to-play genre.

Developer History

Assassin's Creed III
2012 [Multi]
Far Cry 3
2012 [Multi]
Assassin's Creed Revelations
2011 [Multi]

High Point

Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time was a masterpiece of platform puzzle design, taking an old IP and offering a new spin on the core mechanics that would develop into *Assassin's Creed*.

1 BUILD A STRONGHOLD

FIRST THING you'll do is build a castle for enemy heroes to try their luck against; it's a pretty straightforward process, with segregated combat zones limiting the resources that you can plonk down in any given area. While you can define the shape of your dungeon to fool invaders with dead ends and the like, much of the construction process comes from working out the optimum positioning of brilliantly creative traps, like giant hamster wheels on tracks or explosive glue-bombs, to lock down invaders while your monsters attack.





> "Watching a replay is a rewarding experience because it gives me the chance to see things that I'm doing well without having meant to"
>
> MATT ZAGURAK SCRIPTWRITER

5

2 JAM IT FULL OF MONSTERS

THE MONSTERS in *TMQFEL* range from big angry dogs to animated shield bots to shambling skeletons to elephant-sized rams; they're all nicely designed and offer a range of defence options. Building the most fiendish castle possible is your aim, so exploiting the combined strengths of monsters is the way to win: big nasty brutes can protect summoners, rams can push heroes into traps, and high-defence bad guys can tie up attackers whilst ranks of ranged troops cut them to bits – this stage is more like an RTS than *D&D*.

3 CHOOSE YOUR HERO

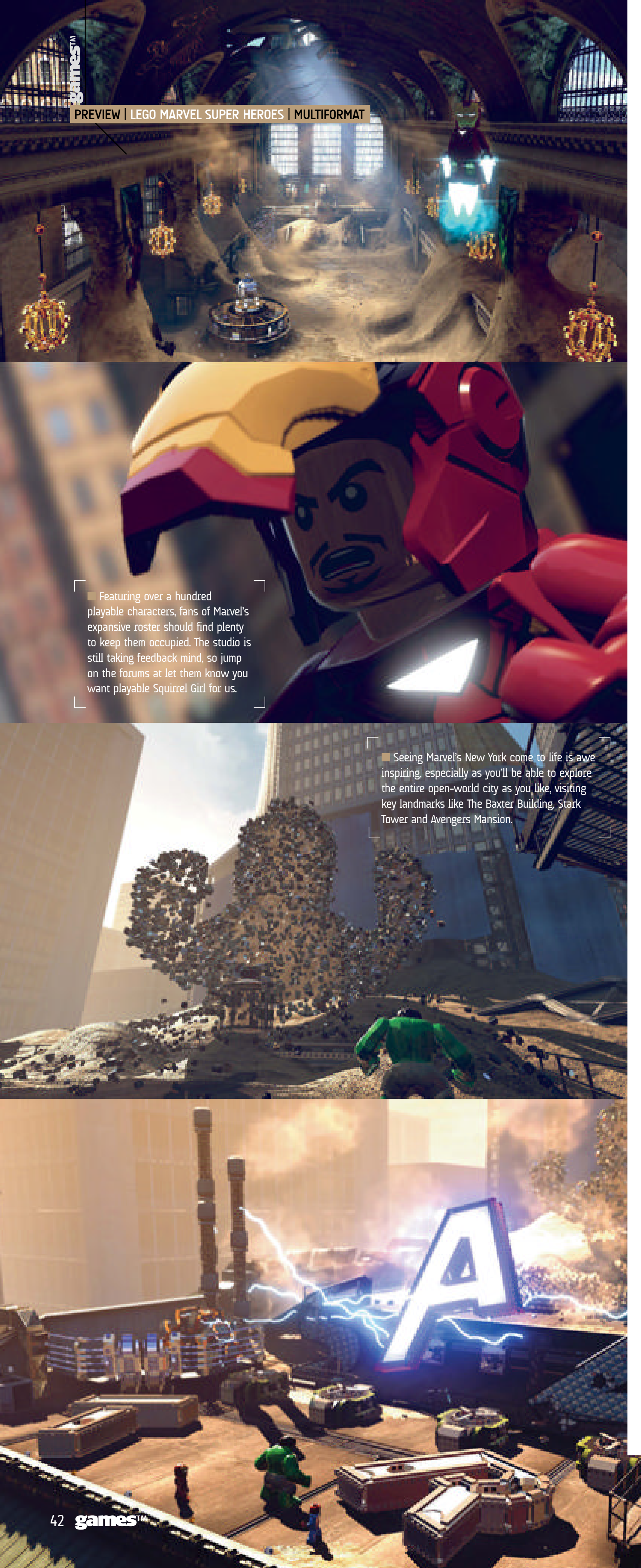
WE WERE given access to the Knight and the Archer classes (there's a Mage, too) which played pretty much as you'd expect, complete with nifty animations. The Knight's heavy armour offers damage protection, while the Archer works at range and does his best to stay away from monsters whilst shooting at them – a process which can be a little fiddly. You'll have access to all three heroes on your account and level them up through conquering enemy castles. Each has fifteen abilities to purchase and improve by spending gold; you can equip five of them at any one time.

4 GO LOOTING

THE MAJORITY of your time in-game is spent invading enemy castles; if you reach the end intact, you'll be rewarded with experience points and that all-important gold. Gameplay is fairly solid, if a little repetitive, but the wide array of player-designed castles should lend variety, while a clever ratings system – which rewards you for saying how much you like each level – also acts as a tracker for your preferences. Whether you survive or slope off defeated, your opponent gets a video of your performance so they can work out how to improve their castle.

5 CHIP IN SOME CASH

AS *TMQFEL* is free-to-play, you can level the playing field a little by shelling out real-world cash for Gems, exchangeable for equipment, monsters, and castle components in the game. Your ability to use items is limited by your level, so while raiding your bank balance can let you progress faster, it hopefully shouldn't be a case of pay-to-win. If you want to change the way your castle looks – different floor patterns, architectural features, windows and so on – then you'll have to reach into your wallet, as many of these are Gem-only purchases.



Featuring over a hundred playable characters, fans of Marvel's expansive roster should find plenty to keep them occupied. The studio is still taking feedback mind, so jump on the forums at let them know you want playable Squirrel Girl for us.

Seeing Marvel's New York come to life is awe inspiring, especially as you'll be able to explore the entire open-world city as you like, visiting key landmarks like The Baxter Building, Stark Tower and Avengers Mansion.

Lego Marvel Super Heroes

CONCEPT TT Games works its magic on the Marvel universe after a successful string of adaptations within DC and Warner Bros. playgrounds.

Lego Marvel Superheroes has been revealed, and we talk to one of the people responsible for rebuilding Lego New York piece by piece

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: UK
Publisher: Warner Bros.
Developer: TT Games
Release: 2013
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Traveller's Tales was founded in 1989 in the UK by Jon Burton and has found success adapting popular franchises into games. After a merge with publisher Giant Interactive, TT Games was formed, and the studio has gone on to develop the insanely popular *Lego* games.

Developer History

Lego City Undercover **2013 [Wii U]**
Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes **2012 [Multi]**
Lego Harry Potter: Years 1-4 **2010 [Multi]**
Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventure **2008 [Multi]**
Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga **2007 [Multi]**

High Point

Lego Star Wars: The Video Game opened up the videogame world to the power of Lego in 2005.

TT Games unveiled its latest venture into the Lego brick sandbox with *Lego Marvel Super Heroes*, an action packed release that is set to incorporate all of the Marvel universe. Following the Silver Surfer's fateful re-entry into Earth's atmosphere, villains and heroes alike are on the hunt for the cosmic bricks that make up his destroyed surfboard. We quiz producer Phil Ring on what to expect from TT Games' most ambitious Lego project yet.

The Lego games traditionally have a fairly tight narrative, yet *Lego Marvel Super Heroes* is set to span the entire Marvel universe. What didn't appeal about focusing specifically on one corner or family from the universe?

We knew that when we were making this game that it wasn't an *Avengers* title. We wanted it to be Lego Marvel, we wanted more characters, we wanted more families, we wanted to be able to mix and match these people together. We want to make sure it's a very authentic Marvel experience for people.

You're developing an original story within the Marvel world, are you able to draw from the comic book and movie worlds for inspiration?

We get to pick and choose what we want to include. So if there's something cool that we like [we just ask]. Marvel have been fantastic to work with. We get the luxury of being able to sit in a place where we can cherry pick the cool things. We're not directly linked in a time period within the Marvel comics; we just get to sit over the top of it and bring all these characters together and have some crazy fun with it.

> "If you're a fan of Spider-Man, the Avengers, Fantastic Four, X-Men, Guardians Of The Galaxy or scores of other Marvel characters, this is the game for you"
>
> TQ JEFFERSON VICE PRESIDENT, MARVEL ENTERTAINMENT

What excites you about having such a vast roster of characters to introduce into the Lego playground?

We get to mix and match heroes (and villains) that have never been put together before. We are really excited that we got to use the Marvel roster, we've got over a hundred playable characters in the game and strangely enough, we don't actually have that many costume variations. So when we're saying we have 100 characters, we are actually saying it's variety. It's the difference between Iron Man and Spider-Man rather than six variations of one character.

We've heard how the hub in *Lego Marvel Super Heroes* might be the most expansive yet; can you speak to how players will be able to interact with New York City?

The hub is not just New York City; it's not just Lego Yew York; it's Lego Marvel New York, it is all of it combined. You can go to the statue of Liberty and there will be a giant Lego version of the Statue of Liberty, but we also have Marvel locations there as well… places around New York that are themed to the different families that you get around the Marvel world.

There might be something there related to the X-Men, or to Thor or to any of the different kinds of characters we've got within the game. We really wanted New York to feel much bigger, kind of like an expansive Marvel playground. We've also got things like the S.H.I.E.L.D Helicarrier – it's your main base that hovers above the city – and you can actually skydive from the Helicarrier down into New York, we wanted it to be one big action-packed game.

These Marvel locations are mini levels in themselves, which is where we get to play up not only the Lego humour, but also things people have seen from the comic books. So they'll be something there that people might go, there will be things where people go 'Oh, I know where that's from, it's actually taken from this series or this comic book.' The great thing for us is because of the amount of variety in how these environments look, we've got this impression that if you put two levels of our game side-by-side people might actually think they are different games 'cause they will look so different because of the different families and the way the art styles are done.

Is it still exciting to bring franchises to the *Lego* games? What has Marvel brought to the table?

With the *Lego* games we always have to try and do something new and something cool that people won't have expected. What does Marvel bring that we can do differently? That's the way that we are always going to look at it. We are always looking at experimenting, and seeing what we can do from a tech and hardware point of view. When it feels right, we will run with it.



Lego Marvel Super Heroes is easily the most visually impressive game to come out of TT Games. It's hard to believe but it's supposedly coming exclusively to current-generation systems: it's a motion comic that Marvel can only dream of replicating in-house.

BETTER WITH FRIENDS

After *Lego City Undercover*, we were concerned about the future of split-screen play within *Lego* games, however Phil Ring has assured us it will be making a return. "We've got two players split-screen and we are doing as much as we can with the camera. In levels we've got the idea of being able to do dynamic split-screen so you can both run off in your different directions and then come back together, and of course we are trying to give people different split-screen options as well." Though is that reason enough to get excited about the allure of four-player co-op? "It's something we discuss every project. We would only add it [four player co-op] if it brings value to the game, we want to make sure that when we do introduce it it's for the right reasons."

FIFA 14

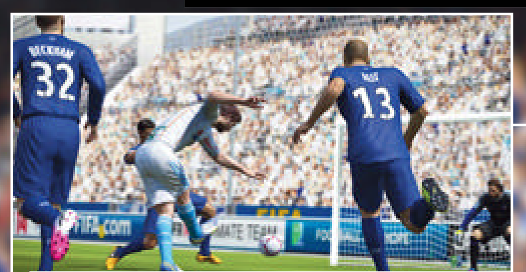
CONCEPT The behemoth of football sims returns this year with *FIFA 14*, once again bringing its wide spread of licences with its tuned-to perfection gameplay mechanics.

Another step towards on the pitch perfection?

Just as this season's premier league begins to wrap, EA is restarting the hype machine for one of the year's most lucrative licences, *FIFA 14*. The series has come a long way since 1993's *FIFA International Soccer*, and as EA Sports prepares the 21st iteration, it is moving one step closer to achieving a pure simulation football experience. "It's not getting harder, it's getting more fun," said Nick Cannon, executive producer as we quizzed him on what the future holds for football's most popular interactive franchise.

FIFA 11 finally won the yearly derby, pulling football fans away from rival *Pro Evolution Soccer* with mechanics that happily merged *FIFA*'s arcade feel with precision control. EA Sports has been on a mission of self-improvement ever since, taking baby steps towards perfection. Despite the dawn of the next generation of consoles on the near horizon, *FIFA 14* is defiantly current generation, but is it time for the engine to receive an overhaul? "Ultimately for us, what we're doing is making the best game every year. I don't see us running out of ideas," said Cannon eagerly. "How we improve gameplay and innovate is still key; how we innovate career mode and improve online, there's still plenty for us to do. So I don't see that coming any time soon. All the things I know we can't get to this year, that we'd like to, I'm confident that we'll be able to use in years to come."

So what should we expect from this year's instalment? Aside from the usual update of player rosters, stadiums and clubs, *FIFA 14* seems to improving on every facet of design from *13* – still, will it be enough to fend off *Pro Evolution Soccer*'s next generational Fox Engine counter attack? Sadly, we won't know the answer to that until later this year.



THE MONEY SHOT

LIKE EVERY yearly iteration, the general mechanics will be fine-tuned, but for *FIFA* fanatics, the biggest changes are likely to found in the six yard box. "The standout feature is probably the shooting, that's what's resonating with the testers. It's that very visual 'Wow,'" says Cannon. Shots now take the striker's skill and body shape, as well as accuracy and strength of shot, into consideration. Expect fewer wonder strikes from Robin Van Persie when under pressure this time around.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Canada
Publisher: EA
Developer: EA Canada
Release: 2013
Players: 1-TBA

Developer Profile

Founded in 1983, EA Canada is one of the industry's largest studios housing over 2000 employees as its employees work on everything from EA Sports titles to the *Need For Speed* and *Skate* licences. With *FIFA 10* the studio overcame a decade of mediocrity and has quickly become the undisputed champion of sports games.

Developer History

FIFA 13 **2012 [Multi]**
FIFA 10 **2009 [Multi]**
FIFA 97 **1996 [Multi]**
FIFA International Soccer **1993 [Multi]**

High Point

FIFA 11 took the new engine and worked wonders with it, building on the fantastic core tenets of its predecessor and producing a world class entry into the long running franchise.



FOOTBALL MANAGER

TAKING PLAYERS one step closer to the dug out, *FIFA 14* is set to improve on almost every facet of Ultimate Team and Manager modes. Alongside the behind the scenes tweaks, gamers should expect a new global scouting network that allows you to scout players with specific attributes instead of high skill points – as any good manager knows, big numbers on paper don't always translate to on the pitch performance.

SUNDAY LEAGUE

FIFA NOW appeals to a wide array of player skills, so following complaints over difficulty spikes throughout *13*, EA is eager to refine the mechanics this time around. "Ultimately we're trying to make the most fun experience possible," says Cannon. "For some people this is the only game they buy each year… we've got five different difficulties in the game – it's all about entertainment. The simulation aspect is making it as realistic as possible but it's got to balance with fun."

■ Below: As hard as it may be to believe, this is actually a pretty good representation of how multiplayer occurs in *Company Of Heroes 2*. It looks hectic, but there's a bit more direction to it that it might seem. Right: Smoke from explosions and grenades will obscure line of sight with the TrueView feature. Think fast and you can use this to your advantage to surprise your enemies once the smoke clears.



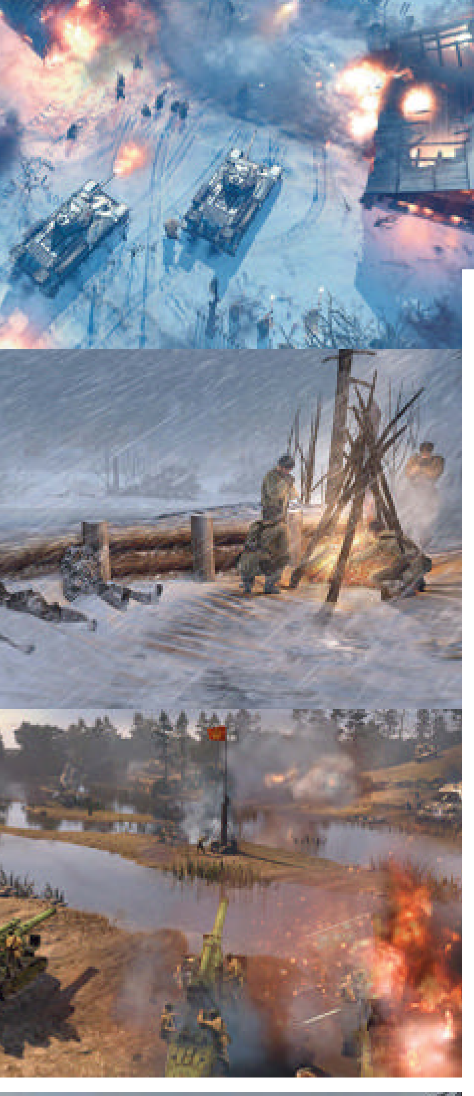
I CAN('T) SEE YOU

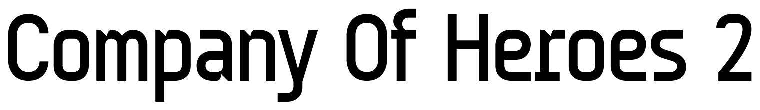
IT WOULD BE remiss of us to ignore the new TrueView feature in *Company Of Heroes 2*. Reinventing the line of sight feature so common in RTS games should not be taken lightly, but you'll be pleased to hear it works. Really well, in fact. Anything taller than your units blocks their line of sight, but affects your opponents too. This means you're able to set up more meaningful ambushes by staying aware of what your enemies can and can't see. It means you can get closer to an opposing unit than ever before without being spotted before initiating combat. Combine this with properly destructible terrain and cover and you've got a whole new level of depth to think about when manoeuvring your troops.





■ Above: Tanks obviously play a huge part in any World War II game, but hopefully *Company Of Heroes 2* won't be too reliant on them. Right: Keeping your units warm will play a huge part in surviving the winter maps. Be warned.





Company Of Heroes 2

CONCEPT ■ The same old *Company Of Heroes* gameplay, but now with the elements to contend with. Waist-deep snow, thin ice and blizzards are all have a part to play here.

In Soviet Russia, tank rushes you

Relic Entertainment might have swapped hands from THQ to Sega, but that doesn't really mean anything has changed for the RTS developer. *Company Of Heroes 2* marches on, and if our recent hands-on with the multiplayer is anything to go on, we're all in for a treat. Mostly because – with the original *Company Of Heroes* – Relic had a lot of the elements in place already; very little needed to be done to make the sequel the superlative RTS it's shaping up to be.

The big addition is snow and while its effect in single-player is a little more scripted, how it plays out in a multiplayer match is a considerably more nuanced than that. Taking and holding a resource point, for example, remains the focus of multiplayer games, and doing so with temperatures dropping below freezing isn't always an easy task.

Though units can build fires, their presence is an obvious giveaway; if you hope to keep a squad alive, it's best to take to the warmth of a building. As expected, these aren't always as plentiful as you might like but it still ensures they're a little more used than in previous *Company Of Heroes* multiplayer matches.

/// Frozen water plays a big part in the strategy of a multiplayer game, too, whether it's the trepidation of risking an assault over hardened water instead of opting for a safer but longer route or choosing to defend a position on the embankment, hoping to waste an entire regiment of enemy units by destroying the ice as they cross.

Though we didn't see any of this inventiveness during our hands-on, it's still a plausible tactic that should excite any future commanders. It's a new level of environmental detail that should mean it becomes just as important to understand the map you're playing on as it is the strategy of your opponents.

Speaking of which, it would only be right to talk of concerns over the balancing of units. As we felt our way around the different structures and units, it seemed many others had already figured the key to victory. You may be tempted to construct a more generalised force, something built in equal parts of infantry, armoured vehicles and anti-tank units and, given a less restrictive timescale, you'd be right to do so. But each multiplayer battle doesn't last too long, and if you waste time messing around with weaker infantry units you will, inevitably, lose your battle.

Tanks are a must have, and if you start with the armoured vehicle building first, you'll have access to the anti-infantry flamethrower tank as well as the more generalised light, medium or heavy tanks. This preference can feel a little unfair for those who prefer to opt for the flexibility of infantry, and seems a shame to otherwise overlook some of the other specialised buildings. It's especially true when you realise upgraded units – such as Shock Troopers – aren't much cheaper than decent strength tanks.

Fuel is a much more finite resource, of course, but it always felt like there was an emphasis here that could ultimately hurt the longevity of *Company Of Heroes 2*. In truth, some maps seemed better suited to vehicle combat than others, and maybe we'll see greater variety once the game finally releases. Nonetheless these are concerns easily handled by a set of number switches in the name of balancing. By the time Relic releases its RTS sequel next month we could be playing an entirely different game – and it's not really possible to fathom the depth of such a game when you're being pit against as eclectic a group of beta testers, from both new and old.

When all said and done, *Company Of Heroes 2* has already provided some of the most intense RTS battles in the genre – and that's in the same year that *StarCraft 2: Heart Of The Swarm* was released – which can only bode well for the sequel and, perhaps, even the future of the franchise.

> "We just wanted to add extra value to the tactical play that our players already love"
>
> QUINN DUFFY RELIC ENTERTAINMENT



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: US
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Relic Entertainment
Release: 25 June 2013
Genre: Real-Time Strategy
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Having developed *Homeworld*, *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War* and *Company Of Heroes*, Relic Entertainment has proven itself to be one of the major players in the RTS genre. Once a THQ asset and now wholly owned by Sega – one of few publishers that actually seems to care about RTS – Relic has a bright future ahead of itself.

Developer History

Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine **2011 [PC, PS3, Xbox 360]**

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War II **2009 [PC]**

Company Of Heroes **2006 [PC]**

Homeworld 2 **2006 [PC]**

High Point

Though it'll be a close call between *Dawn Of War 2* and *Company Of Heroes*, many PC gamers will tell you it's the latter that highlights Relic Entertainment as a developer of the best RTS games.

■ Above: Namco Tales Studio was dissolved shortly after the development on *Tales Of Xillia* finished, with the sequel developed primarily by the same team working in-house at Namco.



■ Above: The battle system across the *Tales* series has been commended for avoiding the turn-based standard of JRPGs. Instead, battles take an action-based form that makes hitting numbers out of an enemy much more compelling.

Tales Of Xillia

CONCEPT ■ Released in 2011 in Japan, the thirteenth flagship *Tales* game finally makes its way to the West this summer.

Hideo Baba discusses the secret behind Xillia's success

Hideo Baba is clearly relieved to be finally bringing *Tales Of Xillia* to the West nearly two years after its initial Japanese release. However, while the delay has come much to the chagrin of series' fans, the timing couldn't be better. It has been 15 years since the *Tales* franchise first arrived on the PSone and the series continues to deliver engaging enemy encounters and a suitably action-orientated alternative to traditional JRPG systems. Covering further gameplay refinements and where the series is set to go next, games™ discusses *Tales Of Xillia* with its effusive overseer, Hideo Baba.

In recent years it feels that the *Tales* series has made a much bigger impact in the West, since *Vesperia* it seems. Why is that?
The visual approach of *Vesperia* was that very anime style so this appearance has had a big impression and impact on the Western fans. The big success of *Ni No Kuni* in the West and its unique anime style shows the approach is growing in Western countries.

> "The storyline, the fantasy world and the real time battle system all had a huge impact at the time"
> HIDEO BABA, NAMCO BANDAI

What is the secret that has kept the series popular over so many years?
I have to say that the characters and the stories are very unique. In addition every title has a totally unique real-time battle system that is action packed. I think those things together are the secret.

So is reinvention the key to keeping the series alive?
Regarding the battle system, every time we tweak it by adding new features or improving the speed or other things. Regarding the stories and the characters, each title has featured brand new characters. So yes, reinvention is important.

Which game in the series means the most to you personally and why?
I have been asked this question so many times but my answer is always the same, *Tales Of Phantasia*, the first instalment in the series. *Phantasia* created a great foundation for the series. The storyline, the fantasy world and the real-time battle system all had a huge impact at the time. We utilise these elements every time to create a new take.

In recent years we've seen the *Tales* games capture the anime and manga look better than ever. With the announcement of the PS4, will the games look even more like an anime than before?

TALES OF XILLIA 2 – OUT NOW!

WHILE WESTERN fans of the *Tales* series wait patiently for the arrival of *Tales Of Xillia* on PlayStation 3, the direct sequel has already been released in its native country of Japan. *Tales Of Xillia 2* arrived in November 2012 in the East and has found favourable – albeit slightly less glowing than its predecessor – reviews. The sequel introduces a new choice system, the effects of which can range from choosing to engage enemies in a fight or not, or changing the way characters act towards the protagonist in a conversation. Namco has yet to confirm a Western release yet, likely waiting to see how well *Tales Of Xillia* performs at retail before localising its sequel.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: In-house
Release: 9 August
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Formerly known as Wolf Team before Namco changed the studio name in 2003, Namco Tales Studio has been the primary developer for the *Tales* series since the franchise began. Since *Xillia*'s Japanese release in 2011, the studio has been dissolved into Namco, but the majority of staff continues to work on the series.

Developer History

Tales Of Xillia
2013 [PlayStation 3]
Tales Of Graces f
2010 [PlayStation 3]
Pac-Man Party
2010 [Wii]
Tales Of Vesperia
2008 [Multi]

High Point

Tales Of Xillia has been lauded as the best in the series to date, garnering near perfect scores when it was released in 2010.

I believe that the spec of the new GPU in the PS4, which is much better than the PS3, will allow us to create better a quality of anime visuals in new games in the series.

How does the storyline come together for each game?
To begin the process, I explain the hero, their profile, their purpose, way of thinking and background. So you can imagine why they do what they do in the game. Then I add a rough approach of the story so the storywriters can create more detail in how everything happens.

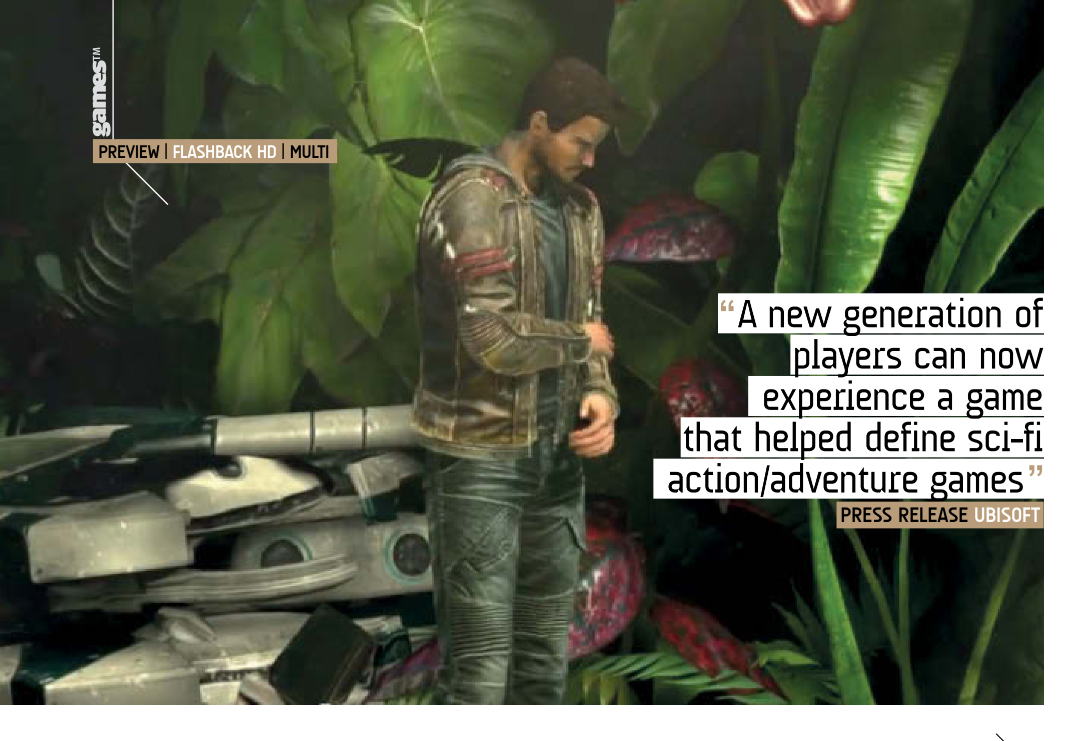
Each *Tales* game has a core theme. Where do those themes come from?
When it comes to the core theme of each new game, we pay attention to the social issues of the world today so we can reflect them in the game. We try to make it so anyone can understand the social themes in the games.

Do you think the themes of the game are the reason for the positive and passionate fan reaction?
I think the core themes are important with the kids to get this kind of response. At the same time we need to pay attention to how we can create that core theme and we need to deal with it carefully. It's a very important point of the series.

You mentioned Western RPGs are inspired by specific parts of pop culture and JRPGs are the same. Do you see a future with a *Tales* game with Western influences or are the JRPG elements the most important?
I believe that Western culture will have an impact on the new titles in the future but, at the same time, the *Tales* series titles will never be *Skyrim*!



Above: *Tales Of Xillia*'s art style differs from the watercolour aesthetic of *Graces*. Right: Baba cites *Ni No Kuni* as one of the reasons JRPGs have become more popular in the last year. While *Xillia* doesn't have the Ghibli touch, the art style has grown to be one of the series' most appealing features.



"A new generation of players can now experience a game that helped define sci-fi action/adventure games"
PRESS RELEASE UBISOFT



Above: An echo from the days where all sci-fi characters communicated via a transparent blue computer image of themselves.

Flashback HD

CONCEPT A re-release of the classic adventure/platform title, handled by the guy who made the original.

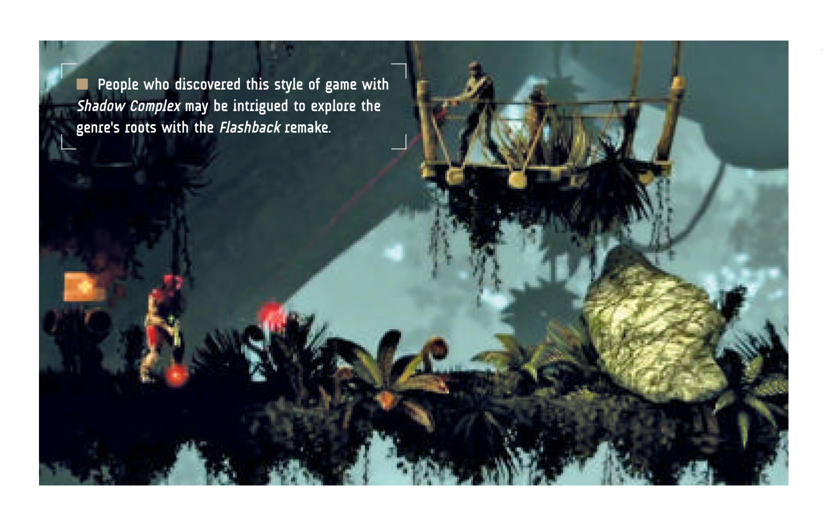
The cult adventure shooter gets an HD re-release – how does Flashback fare 21 years later?

The conundrum with remaking any significant game surely comes in deciding what to change. That's what few people ever think about when they imagine a *Final Fantasy VII* remake – do you forgo the progress of game design since a product's release, just for the sake of nostalgia? In the case of *Flashback*'s HD remake, overseen by creator Paul Cuisset, the choice has been made to replicate the experience of the original almost entirely, while making the most of modern visual tech (Unreal Engine, in this case). Naturally, this is the fan-pleasing approach, yet there are naturally outdated elements to go along with such an update.

The primary indication of *Flashback HD*'s age comes in the style of quests players are handed, relatively simple fetching affairs to reach other environments. *Flashback*'s platforming still feels great, however, light and precise, and therefore stands the test of time well in a genre where jumping tends to be functional rather than entertaining. Running through levels filled with traps and other obstacles is pretty fun when the mechanics still feel this sharp – shooting, which was always a means to an end with *Flashback* rather than the driving force of its design, is controlled by aiming with the right stick. That's obviously a change from the original, but it helps make things a little easier and more console-friendly.

Less convincing is the addition of voice acting, which is laughably bad and in the ballpark of Nineties FMV quality, certainly not up to the standard of something comparable like *Shadow Complex*. Visually, however, *Flashback* is extremely appealing – there's no doubting the quality of the upgrade, here, with a gorgeous contrast between rich jungle environments with cyberpunk-style metal interiors. Character models, too, look pretty good for a downloadable title. Even if not a lot else changes, this is surely as high-end as anyone could ask for from a revamped *Flashback* release.

There's a nice contemporised Nineties quality to the aesthetic, a perhaps deliberate OTT silliness that's been retained by the visuals. Perhaps *Flashback* will only be preaching to the converted, as these HD remakes usually do – yet it's also one of the most curious choices for an upgrade, and something we look forward to taking a greater look at when release day comes. The question of it finding a new audience comes down to the overall feeling of experiencing *Flashback* in 2013, and whether the games that have been inspired by it – once again, *Shadow Complex* comes to mind – have surpassed their forebears.



People who discovered this style of game with *Shadow Complex* may be intrigued to explore the genre's roots with the *Flashback* remake.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360/PS3
Origin: France
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: VectorCell
Release: TBA
Players: 1

Developer Profile

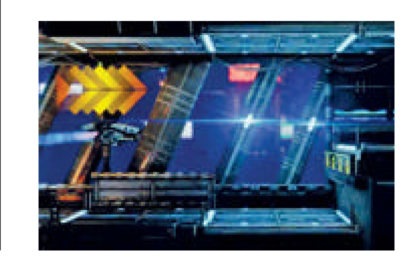
Paul Cuisset
The creator of *Flashback* is returning to his classic property after 21 years of working on various titles, at Delphine Software then later VectorCell. VectorCell's latest project, *AMY*, released last year, wasn't received well by critics, yet there is a design legacy there that stretches over two decades of interesting projects.

Developer History

Amy **[2012]**
Fade To Black **[1995]**
Shaq Fu **[1994]**
Flashback **[1992]**

High Point

Flashback
A well-made, somewhat ahead of its time 2D action-adventure that balanced an interesting sci-fi universe with cerebral, environmental puzzle-based gameplay.





The Legend Of Zelda 3DS

CONCEPT Nintendo is returning to the world of *A Link To The Past* in an exciting new 3DS title.

Returning to Link's most famous adventure

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo EAD
Release: 2013
Genre: Action-Adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Nintendo EAD should need no introduction, led by the iconic Shigeru Miyamoto it has been at the helm of many of Nintendo's greatest releases. Based out of Kyoto Japan, the studio is split into five teams working on many of different franchises such as *The Legend Of Zelda*, *Pikmin*, *Star Fox* and *Animal Crossing*.

Developer History

New Super Mario Bros. U **2012 [Wii U]**
The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword **2011 [Wii]**
Super Mario Galaxy 2 **2010 [Wii]**
Animal Crossing: Wild World **2005 [DS]**

High Point

The first time you place the pieces of the Triforce together, strap on the Master Sword and do battle with Ganon is an experience you'll never forget.

Despite being one of Nintendo's biggest franchises, *The Legend Of Zelda* is still yet to make its debut on the 3DS platform with an original title. A remake of *Ocarina Of Time* launched to great success, but the heroes of time from around the world have been desperately waiting to see where Nintendo would take Link and his quest for the Triforce.

Two decades into the past is the answer, as *A Link To The Past* is receiving a sequel later this year for 3DS. Set in the same game world, *The Legend Of Zelda 3DS* (as it's currently known) looks immediately familiar, with many of the locations and enemies making a return from the seminal SNES adventure.

Link's 2D adventures haven't evolved a great deal since *Link To The Past*, but Nintendo made a conscious effort to reinvent the top-down style on the DS with *The Legend Of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass* and *Spirit Tracks*, though by all accounts this 3DS iteration is a faithful return to traditional *Zelda* games of old. Link's movement and attacks are mapped to the Circle-Pad and face buttons, creating a tighter experience than we've had since motion and touch control took precedence. Combat handles similarly to *Link To The Past* as well, with Link able to charge his sword up for spin attacks and shoot projectiles from it when at full health – it's these little touches that bring a smile to the face of any fan.

Returning to *A Link To The Past* is like going back to an old family house; everything is the same but eerily different, little changes here and there reminding you that this isn't quite the place you remember so well. Though that's not to say it's worse, only different, and with plenty of nods to the old-timers. In a demo, we see Link battling through what looked like the Tower Of Hera – and with Moldorm sat atop the thirteenth floor with his flashing tail still intact, it's a glorious return to one of the best representations of Hyrule.

Nintendo is going out of its way to embrace 3D with its first original 3DS *Zelda*; implementing a greater sense of height and volume into its level design. We see Link being tossed through the air, enemies reflecting arrows and bombs back towards the screen and a wild perspective throughout the environments. We also saw a brief example of *Paper Mario*-style elements being incorporated into the design, as Link is able to turn into a painting on the wall to traverse previously inaccessible areas. It certainly looks like an interesting addition, giving veteran players more reason to return.

The Legend Of Zelda 3DS is coming later this year and is an exciting prospect for any fan of the series, official timeline be damned – this is a must have for any *Legend Of Zelda* fan.

Link can attach to the wall as a painting, letting him access previously inaccessible areas in a wonderful homage to *Paper Mario*.



"Returning to A Link To The Past is like going back to an old family house; everything is the same but eerily different"

Below: One of many returning enemies, Moldorm brings a smile to the face of any veteran player. The years haven't kind to the worm; carefully placed hits to the tail still make it explode.



Not surprisingly, *MotoGP 13* looks gorgeous. In motion, it looks and sounds as slick as ever.

MotoGP 13

CONCEPT ■ A new entry into the *MotoGP* series, a motorcycle racing simulation franchise famed for its good looks.

Developing a need for speed

Back in the hands of Milestone Studio, *MotoGP 13* is looking forward to a wonderful return to form as the developer, responsible for *MotoGP 08*, looks to reinvent the racing sim.

The four years since Milestone's last foray with the series haven't been overly kind, as many racing fans took issue with the direction Monumental Games and Capcom led *MotoGP 9/10* and *MotoGP 10/11* towards. This year's game, then, has plenty for the racing fan to get excited over. A completely new engine makes this the slickest instalment yet, with *MotoGP 13* offering one of the fiercest replications of speed we've seen. But the not-so delicate learning curve is still present.

Milestone is revamping the career mode, which it says will "bring players into the 2013 championship through the eyes of a real MotoGP rider," letting you switch freely between first and third person perspectives throughout races. *MotoGP 13* will of course feature this season's full roster of racers, bikes and tracks – as well as letting you try the IRTA test.

There isn't a great deal of info surrounding the multiplayer, though Milestone says it is going to "re-create exciting events – inspired by reality." Whether this means it'll be feeding weekly race times into the game to go head to head with the track heroes, or will just simply allow you to race against those around the world isn't clear just yet.

You tend to get what you ask for with annualised franchises, but with Milestone at the helm, this is one to keep your eye on if you've been eager to return to *MotoGP*.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Publisher: PQUBE
Developer: Milestone Studio
Release: 2013



Summoning memories of *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island*, this is a must have for any fans of the retro release.

Yoshi's Island 3DS

CONCEPT ■ A brand new addition to the *Yoshi's Island* series, the first since the DS game was released in 2006.

Making a return in the likeliest of places

2013 looks to be the year that classic Nintendo characters come out of hiding and into the hands of eager gamers around the world, and following Luigi's successful revival with *Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon*, we are all for it.

Yoshi is the next character that Nintendo is turning its attention to. After already announcing the unquestionably adorable *Yarn Yoshi* for Wii U earlier in the year, the studio has now pulled back the curtain on another release for the overlooked dinosaur – Nintendo is reviving the popular *Yoshi's Island* for 3DS.

Nearly two decades since the franchise made its debut on the SNES, *Yoshi's Island* 3DS will be a faithful return to platforming days of old. Nintendo breezed over the details, but the screenshots take us back to the glorious days of *Super Mario World 2*, so we can only hope for a return of the puzzle and story-driven gameplay that made the previous iterations so enjoyable to play.

There has been no word on whether original series director Takashi Tezuka will be making a return to supervise the development *Yoshi's Island 3DS*, though considering his role on the Wii U title we expect to see his influence throughout the game.

2013 is shaping up to be a very exciting time for Nintendo system owners, and with *Yoshi's Island* taking aim at the disappointing *Yoshi's Story* on N64, it might finally be time to stick that SNES back in the cupboard.

INFORMATION

Details

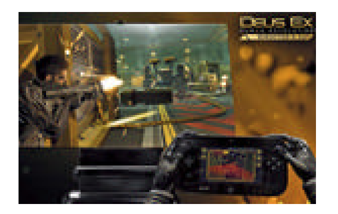
Format: 3DS
Origin: Nintendo
Publisher: In-house
Release: 2013

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION DIRECTOR'S CUT

Format: **Wii U**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **Eidos Montreal**
ETA: **2013**



EIDOS' *DEUS EX* reboot is making its way to Wii U in 2013, but it isn't a simple remaster with touch screen support. Square Enix is making sure this is the best iteration of *Deus Ex* available, taking this as an opportunity to tweak the core gameplay, increase the games graphical fidelity and, with the incorporation of the previously available DLC, increasing the length of the campaign by seven-plus hours.

XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

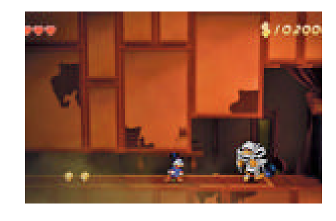
Format: **iOS**
Publisher: **2K Games**
Developer: **Firaxis**
ETA: **Summer 2013**



XCOM HAPPENED to be one of our favourite games of 2012, so it's with pleasure that we can report it is making its way to iOS devices later this year. Ported by 2K China with guidance from Firaxis, the teams are working hard to bring the full *XCOM* experience to your pocket. Aside from a reduced number of maps, every other facet of *XCOM* looks to have been converted, so trust us when we say – 'we will be watching'.

DUCKTALES: REMASTERED

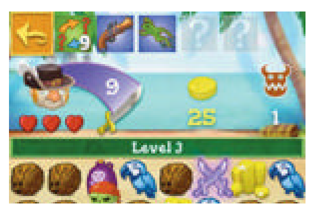
Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Summer 2013**



OF ALL the announcements we expected this year, Capcom and Disney bringing back classics from years gone by wasn't topping our list. But here we are; the NES classic *DuckTales* is coming to home consoles this summer with remastered graphics, a vocal cast returning from the TV show and scalable difficulty for those players who aren't up to the same masochistic challenge as gamers had in the Nineties.

SCURVY SCALLYWAGS

Format: **iOS**
Publisher: **Ron Gilbert**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Summer 2013**



AFTER COMPLETING development on *The Cave* at Double Fine and then hastily abandoning ship, we wondered where Ron Gilbert might end up. Who'd have thought it would be an iOS puzzle game in the same vein as *Puzzle Quest*? A spiritual sequel to *Realms Of Gold*, *Scurvy Scallywags* looks more intuitive than other match-three RPGs as you can move your character around the board.

SECRET PONCHOS

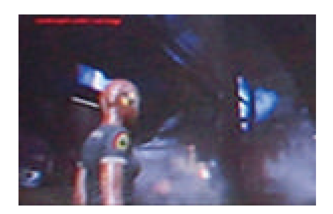
Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Switchblade Monkeys**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



FROM NEWCOMERS Switchblade Monkeys, *Secret Ponchos* pits friend against friend in a top-down competitive shooter inspired by the westerns of times gone by. It's touting some seriously beautiful graphics, not to mention a system that builds your notoriety with its persistent always online world through collecting bounties and killing outlaws that dare challenge your pistols.

ALIEN

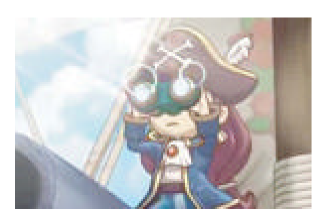
Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Sega**
Developer: **Creative Assembly**
ETA: **2014**



THIS ONE has been rumoured for close to two years, but it looks like we are getting one step closer to Creative Assembly's ambitious dream of saving the *Alien* franchise. A horror game based on Ridley Scott's masterpiece, we've only heard whispers; but one Alien on a ship with gameplay inspired by *Dead Space* – it's hard not to get excited. If anyone can help us forget *Colonial Marines*, it's Creative Assembly.

FANTASY LIFE

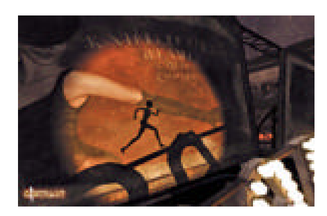
Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Level 5**
Developer: **Level-5, 1Up Studio**
ETA: **2013**



COMING OUT of the studio that's brought us *Professor Layton* and *Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch*, *Fantasy Life* is a life simulation game that looks to be merging *Animal Crossing* and *Harvest Moon* in glorious unison. *Fantasy Life* has been in development for a while, but as it finally makes its way to 3DS, we can't help but get excited over its wonderful score and beautiful visuals.

CONTRAST

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Compulsion Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**

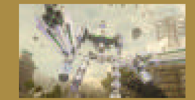


AFTER FOUR years, Compulsion Games has finally unveiled *Contrast*, the surreal platformer set in a Twenties dreamscape. You take on the role of Dawn, a girl who has the ability to move between the physical and shadow worlds. Through the manipulation of light, Dawn can blur the lines between 3D landscapes and a 2D shadowscape, it looks like an incredibly fun play on conventional puzzle-platformers.



DELAYED – Disney Infinity (Multi)

Disney's answer to *Skylanders*, originally planned to launch alongside *Monsters University*'s cinema debut in June, the delay lets the house of mouse add some bells and whistles. Expect it to launch this August.

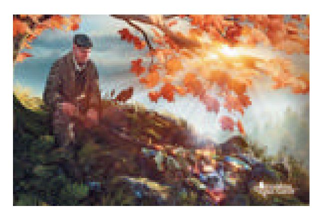


DELAYED – Earth Defence Force 2025 (Multi)

Earth Defence Force 2025 (or *Earth Defence Force 4* for those the other side of the pond) has been pushed back to July in the Japan. No release date has been announced for Europe or North America just yet.

THE VANISHING OF ETHAN CARTER

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **The Astronauts**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



COMING OFF the back of *Bulletstorm* and *Gears Of War: Judgment*, you'd expect anything associated with Adrian Chmielarz to have its fair share of violent content, surprising then, that his new title is dropping the combat entirely and picking up a "weird fiction horror" vibe. Inspired by macabre pulp of the early 20th century, *Ethan Carter* is a detective game where the player has an ability to visualise crime scenes.

TRANSISTOR

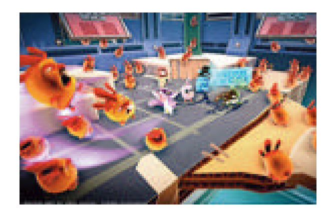
Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Supergiant Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



LIKE THE rest of the gaming world, we've been eagerly anticipating the next step of *Bastion* developers Supergiant Games. The reveal to *Transistor* was awe-inspiring; the science fiction action-RPG looks worlds away from *Bastion*, but we are certainly intrigued by Red's fight for life-and-death plight as she looks to unlock the mysteries of a weapon gifted to her by would-be assassins.

TINY BRAINS

Format: **TBA**
Publisher: **Spearhead Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



SPEARHEAD GAMES is about to become a developer to watch, helmed by developers from *Assassin's Creed*, *Dead Space* and *Army Of Two* – *Tiny Brains* is the debut game from the new studio. A 3D action co-op puzzler that encourages innovative play between four players, players take the role of genius lab animals in a desperate attempt to escape the tests of a mad scientist.

MIND ZERO

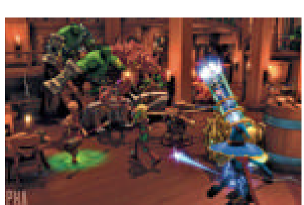
Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Zerodiv**
Developer: **Acquire**
ETA: **2013**



CLASS OF Heroes developer Acquire (in collaboration with Zerodiv) has announced its latest title, a JRPG exclusively for the PlayStation Vita – *Mind Zero* is set across two worlds. Following the success of *Persona 4*, we aren't surprised to see more games cropping up set in Japanese schools, though we certainly hope Persona's success guarantees a release for *Mind Zero* outside of Japan.

DUNGEON DEFENDERS II

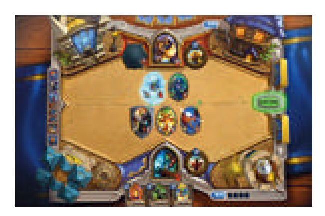
Format: **PC, iOS**
Publisher: **In-house**
Developer: **Trendy Entertainment**
ETA: **2013**



THE WILDLY entertaining tower defence/action hybrid returns this year with *Dungeon Defenders II*, dropping the price and picking up a free to play model as it introduces a League of Legends competitive mode alongside its existing co-operative play. *Dungeon Defenders II* looks to be avoiding console release entirely, instead focusing resources on getting cross-platform multiplayer working.

HEROES OF WARCRAFT: HEARTHSTONE

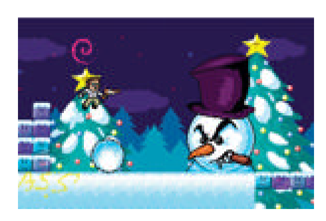
Format: **PC, iOS**
Publisher: **In-house**
Developer: **Blizzard Entertainment**
ETA: **2013**



WORLD OF WARCRAFT sees its next expansion this fall, but perhaps not in the way you would expect. Blizzard is going all digital with a competitive card game: *Heroes Of Warcraft Hearthstone*. Pure fan service, *Hearthstone* lets players assemble and craft a deck of their favourite characters (not to mention raid bosses) and fight friends on dynamic maps across both the iOS and PC platforms.

THE ANGRY VIDEO GAME NERD ADVENTURES

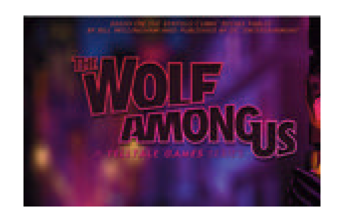
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **ScrewAttack Games**
Developer: **Freakzone Games**
ETA: **2013**



HE HAS conquered the internet, has a movie due out this year, and now The Angry Video Game Nerd is coming full circle. Yes, the irascible bile-spouting denigrator of classic cartridge software is appearing in his own retro-inspired 2D platformer. Currently seeking support on Steam Greenlight, the adventure involves James Rolfe's Nerd flipping the bird through ten stages of unadulterated nostalgia.

FABLES: THE WOLF AMONG US

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **TellTale Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



TELLTALE STOLE the show with its adaptation of Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* in 2012, so excitement is already starting to swell around the studio's next venture into the world of comics. Based on the expansive *Fables* world created by Bill Willingham at Vertigo, *The Wolf Among Us* will focus on Bigby "the big bad" Wolf as he attempts to keep the many denizens of Fabletown in check.



“The atmosphere, the music and the gameplay all kinda come together, and all the mistakes that happened with Castlevania were fixed to a certain extent”

DAVID COX, KONAMI

WHY I ...

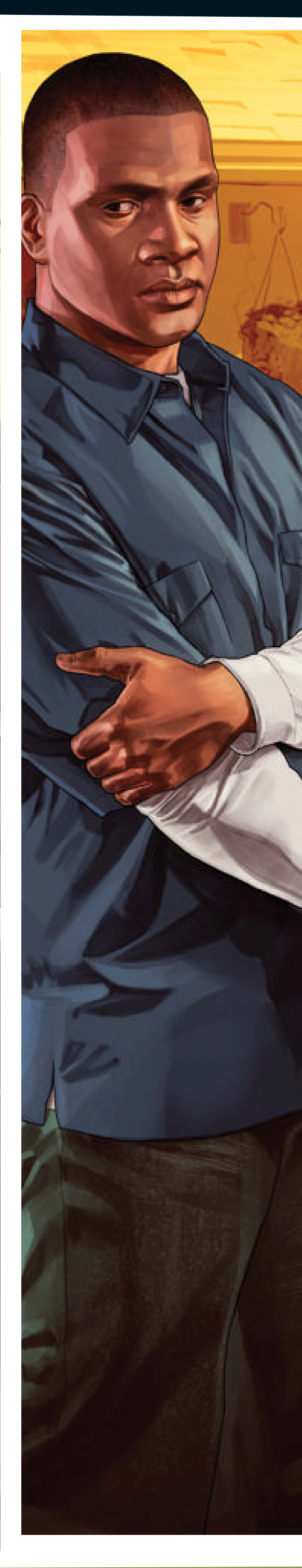
Super Castlevania IV

DAVID COX, KONAMI

That's easy. I love Super Castlevania IV *because for me it's* Castlevania *perfected. It's the original concept perfected, and what I really love about it is that the atmosphere, the music and the gameplay all kinda come together, and all the mistakes that happened with* Castlevania *were fixed to a certain extent. I suppose* Castlevania IV *came at a time in my life when I was really into games and I remember I got the game – I got the Japanese version actually cause I had the Super Famicom – I played it all night until sun-up and loved it. I just became obsessed with* Castlevania. *It's what made me want to work in videogames, and it's what made me want to work for Konami… It's fate.*









GTA V THE BEAST OF AMERICA

With four months to go until release, we've finally seen Grand Theft Auto V in action. If you thought the current generation had hit its limits, Rockstar is planning to show you otherwise...

Almost five years exactly since the release of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, we finally find ourselves sat in front of *Grand Theft Auto V*. While it's been a long time since *GTA*'s last mainline instalment, Rockstar's fascinating form across this generation has seen the series' open world and storytelling DNA manifest itself across many projects: between *Red Dead Redemption*, *LA Noire*, *Max Payne 3* and of course, *GTA IV*'s peerless DLC packs, Rockstar had plenty to draw on when crafting its hallmark series' most ambitious entry to date. *GTA V* is both an overhaul for the series and a love letter to fans, radically altering the structure of *GTA* with its three playable characters, while at the same time infusing it with many of the classically fun elements that some players felt short-changed on in *GTA IV*. As a bookend to this protracted console generation, you'll be pleased to hear there's rather a lot to get excited about in the fifth *GTA*.

During our demo, we got a glimpse of the three protagonists interacting with the open environment in their individual ways, before witnessing a heist-style mission involving the trio that's designed to showcase this tenet of *GTA V*'s design. Our tunnel vision snapshot of Los Santos encompassed much of what makes the series iconic: the humour that spotlights America's absurdities, the troubled characters with a tendency for absolute silliness and of course the extraordinary city design. »

We begin in the sky with the youngest playable character, Franklin, observing Los Santos from a helicopter at one of the highest points of *GTA V*'s map. Here, we're offered a spectacular overview of the game's landmass; the kind of sight that clearly illustrates a world bigger than those seen in *Red Dead* or *GTA IV*. Rockstar's representative explains how the company has learned from the past when it comes to creating characters, story and the world – there's a strong sense that this is the culmination of all past entries, an effort to make the ultimate open world game, with a culturally varied geography encompassing a myriad of quirky residents.

As *GTA IV*'s Liberty City perfectly captured the densely detailed essence of New York and its surrounding territory, so too does Los Santos with its interpretation of Los Angeles. This opening shot of the Los Santos vista is *Just Cause*-sized, an immense county elevated by an unprecedented level of detail; we see desert land, greenery, sea and the distant visage of skyscrapers. Vineyards, farmland and rivers are all out there somewhere, waiting to be found for your potential amusement – Rockstar explains that there are plenty of paranoid lunatics out there in the sticks, connecting the dots somewhat with 2004's *San Andreas*, where the small country towns were basically the symbol of that game's groundbreaking scale. Franklin jumps out of the helicopter, and we see Los Santos in further detail as he activates a rainbow-coloured parachute. Hovering over the hills near *GTA V*'s version of Mount Chiliad, the influence of *Red Dead* is noted as Franklin floats past a pack of deer, which will likely be a pleasing feature for the many who enjoyed the nature part of Rockstar's Wild West epic.

There's an original score for the first time, too, which reacts to whatever context you happen to put one of your three available protagonists into. Skydiving and parachuting is accompanied in our demo by an instrumental track we'd describe as Jan Hammer-inspired and slightly electro, a suitably ambient match for the feeling of gliding across such a breathtaking overworld. Despite being in a fairly hilly region, there's still plenty to absorb in terms of incremental detail, including a huge bridge off to our left, an ATV dirt track stretching around the mountain to our right and, when Franklin touches down, people fishing in the river next to a valley.

As we're about to switch from Franklin to another part of the map, we're shown a statistics screen of his skill progression – as with *San Andreas*, this'll be a fundamental part of your adventure through Los Santos, with allocated bars for all Franklin's major attributes. Rockstar explains that it's there to fit your choices; whether you want to consistently level up all three main characters, or pick your favourite and run with them, there's the capacity to do that. Certainly, on this evidence, it seems that this new version of Los Santos is trying to bring together the many shades of open world design seen in Rockstar's past twelve years of output. And that's before we've seen the underwater bits.



"THIS IS THE KIND OF HIGHER-LEVEL SANDBOX STUFF WE FOUND MOST EXCITING ABOUT GTA V"

It will be interesting to work out the state of each Los Santos neighbourhood.

We then switch seamlessly, via a Google Street View-style cutting animation, to another protagonist, Trevor, who wakes up in his underpants, in the middle of nowhere. Surrounded by the dead bodies of the Lost – the focus of superb bikers' downfall saga *Lost & Damned* – old Trev has crossed the West Coast branch of this gang, yet finds himself having come out on top in this conflict. The out-of-context sight of Trevor in his y-fronts, in the middle of nowhere, recalls the opening moments of *Breaking Bad* a little. Trevor, you may have noted from our last set of *GTA V* coverage, is the classic crazy of the trio, a loose cannon and flight expert who will offer the earliest access to planes. Here, he's situated on an island just off the coast, where there's a helpfully placed boat to take us to our next location.

We're shown the revamped water physics, which allow this speedboat, a Zodiac, to essentially jump off waves in a floaty, stuntman-like fashion. It looks more fun than the relatively static boat sections from *GTA IV*. We're told that some aircraft and boats will come with parachutes and scuba gear, just as Trevor drops into the deep blue off the coast, where we're demonstrated the supremely detailed state of the game's enormous ocean backdrop, which far outstrips the odd sighting of jellyfish and seaweed from San Andreas in terms of set dressing. There's an entire world going on down here, with wildlife pottering around (located where it should be, Rockstar tells us), against a backdrop of miscellaneous parts of a wrecked tanker resting on the seabed. There's a gorgeous bright blue hue to this underwater world, evidently allowing Rockstar to use its art direction skills on a completely different type of environment, bringing life to a part of the game world that could otherwise be merely functional.

We see fellow scuba divers scouring the wreckage for valuable containers, which are hinted to us as perhaps being the basis of a mission at some point later in the game. It's a nice surprise seeing NPCs in this kind of location – like *Red Dead*, Rockstar's aim is to create a dynamic world where you never have to travel too far to find something going on. As well as the prospect of skydiving onto the Los Santos landscape, this is the kind of higher-level sandbox stuff we found the most exciting about seeing *GTA V* in

HOW A GTA V MISSION WORKS

Here's how the mission 'Blitz Play', involving the three main characters, pans out...

STEP ONE
PREPARATION

■ We didn't see this part, but we saw the end result. Prior to 'Blitz Play', you need to find the right disguises for the heist. In this case, they're all wearing boilersuits and masks – Trevor's wearing a monkey mask. You also need to pick a spot to ditch the vehicle at the end of a heist and set up a getaway car.

STEP TWO
MEET UP

■ We see a cutscene play out where the three characters are taking us through the heist. Apparently Michael is a big fan of retro action movies, and his plan here, based on intel he got from an FIB buddy, is very much inspired by that.

STEP THREE
THERE IT IS!

■ Trevor has to spot the vehicle coming, which you look for through binoculars. He then tells Michael the right time to move his vehicle in its path, stopping it – then, from an alleyway, we see Franklin ram the truck, setting it up for the three characters to make a play for the loot.

STEP FOUR
THE RAID

■ Franklin blows off the door with a sticky bomb and Michael gets the stuff. The crew of the armoured car mention that the police will be there in moments – which they are. Four stars are activated and the police descend in force. The three characters have to fight them off before making an escape. Switching between the three offers a tactical advantage.



STEP FIVE
SNIPERS!

■ Switching to Trevor allows you to take on incoming snipers to protect the other two. You're thinking in slightly different dimensions to a traditional *GTA* game – utilising smart positions and skills seems to be the key to getting these missions done. It almost looks like you're playing a strategic shooter.

STEP SIX
ESCAPE, DITCH VEHICLE

■ Franklin escapes with the money in the dustcart. He takes it to an underpass – a position predetermined by the player in this mission – where a getaway car is waiting (again, selected by the player). Franklin torches the vehicle, showing off the pretty new fire effects, gets in the car and drives off. Demo over! But the memories will last a lifetime... plus, we can make plenty more in September.



Expect the largest range of vehicles the series has ever seen, too.

action; the feeling of engaging this open world with an adventurous spirit, and having that approach rewarded with enjoyable design curios. While we don't expect every inch of the ocean floor to be as readily packed with this much stuff, there will doubtlessly be secrets to find, and the prospect of missions involving these areas will allow Rockstar to expand its gameplay remit beyond the land and sky.

When was the last time you really enjoyed going underwater in a videogame? Running away from Emerald Weapon while looking for the secret sub in *FFVII*? It opens up a whole range of possibilities, for Rockstar, offering another playground that'll likely be made more entertaining by the presence of submarines to dick about in (though we didn't see this in action).

This scenic exploration of the deep blue is interrupted by the sight of a man-eating shark, which Trev (we're calling him that, now) responds to with a panicked gulp of air inside his scuba gear. Ascending to the top of the water, where a fin scarily circles his position, we switch seamlessly to another part of the city as the third and final protagonist, Michael, the former criminal in semi-witness protection with a penchant for tennis. He's in central Vinewood, which offers us a first glimpse of *GTA*'s trademark cityscape. In front of Michael, we see a clear replication of the downtown Los Angeles skyline at night, and in the distance behind us, the impressive vision of the Vinewood sign on the hill. The streets are filled with the bright lights of bars and clubs – this is a real hub area, kind of like an analogue to Liberty City's Star Junction in basic terms, we suppose. Along with the low-hanging traffic lights and the walk of fame stars on the ground, it's an impressive recreation of the real Hollywood.

This is a hotspot for showbiz has-beens. An NPC – faded Vinewood actress Pamela Drake – rambles her tale on the street corner to anyone who can be bothered to listen. Like the random people in *GTA IV*, who offered narrative-enriching vignettes on top of Niko Bellic's story, or the students in *Bully* who'd pop up all over Bullworth town, there'll be plenty of characters with a story to tell. We're shown an optional tour bus by the roadside, which we're told highlights the sleazier elements of Vinewood. Then, we pass a fictional version of the world-famous cinema Grauman's Chinese Theatre, where one chap is dressed as a Republican Space Ranger (looking more Master Chief-esque than ever) and another is dressed as an in-universe superhero known as Impotent Rage.

For those of you who haven't been outside the real Grauman's Chinese Theatre, where street performers dressed as superheroes offer to pose with you for money while you accidentally tread over the concrete handprints of Judy Garland, it sums up the American Bognor Regis vibe that permeates Hollywood Boulevard, of a slightly grotty street living off the glory of its own showbiz façade. The outside-looking-in approach to American culture brought to *GTA* by Rockstar pays off here – one of the street performers sadly mutters about how he wanted to do Shakespeare, and both wannabe actors look utterly daft. *GTA* is full of characters falling afoul of the American Dream, and this Los Santos is seemingly no different.

Prompted by the appearance of the Republican Space Ranger, Rockstar mentions that the in-game TV feature will return, just as Michael stops to take a picture of the wannabe actors with his new Samsung-style smartphone – these images can be shared via Rockstar's Social Club website, apparently, but more interesting is the ability to use the in-game internet on the phone, too. We're intrigued to see how it will figure into the story without the novelty of *GTA IV*'s dating system.

Michael sees a group of paparazzi snapping someone as Rockstar demonstrates one of the many dynamic events taking place within this immense sandbox. A young actress, Lacey Jonas, is being harassed by these professional stalkers, and Michael's job is to escort her out of there, escaping the press and driving her back home. During this, we get to take in a

"THIS SCENIC EXPLORATION OF THE DEEP BLUE IS INTERRUPTED BY THE SIGHT OF A MAN-EATING SHARK"

POWER PLAY

The three characters' bespoke special abilities



FRANKLIN

Expert Driving

■ **Take sharp corners in slow-motion for a smart getaway as Franklin, which falls in line with his background of working for a dodgy car dealer.**

TREVOR

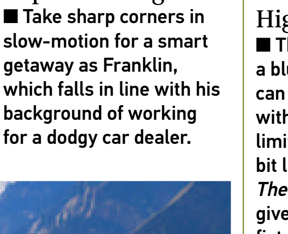
Extra Damage, Higher Defence

■ **The screen adopts a blue hue, and Trevor can do double damage with firearms for a limited time. Sounds a bit like using Flash in *The Warriors*, when your given character lets his fists fly.**

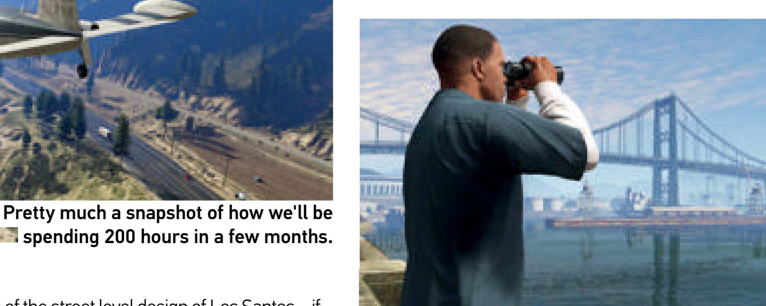
MICHAEL

'Bullet Time'

■ **Rockstar has experience of slow-mo mechanics from *Max Payne 3*, of course, and a spin on that feature will be Michael's special ability. We're thinking of them like perks that match the personalities of each bloke.**



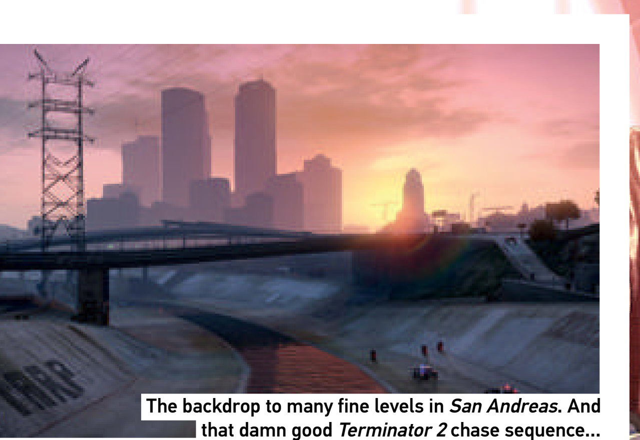
Pretty much a snapshot of how we'll be spending 200 hours in a few months.



little more of the street level design of Los Santos – if you enjoyed the movie *Drive* (and let's face it, everyone did), the low traffic lights of LA and potential for police chases should be filling your mind with amusing ideas. On the drive to Lacey's posh pad in the hills, we see a deer run in front of the car for a brief second, demonstrating how nature and civilised open world elements will collide.

As this event ends, the red sky of dawn begins to emerge on the horizon. This demo is doing its job in teasing the world that awaits players, and it's that sense of adventure that impresses us most about *Grand Theft Auto V*. The skies, the water, the city streets – it feels alive in the same way *Red Dead* and *GTA IV* did, capturing a very acute sense of place that's rare in a videogame. While we've seen far from the entire mass of land we'll get to wander around in Los Santos, the parts of the city we do see look stunning, both as an LA pastiche and as an exaggerated version of reality. The amount of detail on buildings and the streets seems about in line with *GTA IV* and *Red Dead*'s settings, but the significantly increased size really is unprecedented on this generation of consoles for Rockstar.

Yet a larger, more impressive world was basically expected from the day the first trailer for *GTA V* dropped. A greater unknown quantity is the way the three characters come together during a mission, a loose end that's addressed by the final part of our demo, as we get to see a mission – called 'Blitz Play' – in action, which encapsulates some of the heist-based setpieces in *GTA V*, despite not being one of the big heist missions proper. In those, you'll be able to recruit specific crew members to make them happen. »


The backdrop to many fine levels in *San Andreas*. And that damn good *Terminator 2* chase sequence...

These chaps will vary in skill, and the better they are, the bigger the cut they'll want, plus jobs will vary in terms of their demands for certain types of assistance – some heists need more technicians, gunmen and so on. A lot more planning is required, including gathering weapons, vehicles and equipment, while the financial reward will be much greater at the end. 'Blitz Play', though, seemed like more of a microcosm to illustrate how such missions might work structurally.

We've taken you through the specifics of the mission elsewhere in this feature, but what's most interesting about this multi-part setup is the way it plays with the traditional pacing of *Grand Theft Auto*. A typical early *GTA* level has you driving to a certain point, picking someone up or going somewhere for a specific reason, before ending in a firefight or a chase. There are some periods of waiting for action, which Rockstar wants to erase using the character switch function. 'Blitz Play' requires you to prepare equipment, getaway vehicles and more, allowing a feeling of personalisation – flipping between Michael, Trevor and Franklin allows you to instantaneously take on another role within the situation, which itself speeds things up. It's an intriguing balancing act between planning and instant gratification, and character-switching looks like it'll function especially well during firefights, where tactical shooter experience might come in handy.

"IT'S AN INTRIGUING BALANCING ACT BETWEEN PLANNING AND INSTANT GRATIFICATION"

There's a nice action movie-style cut when performing a switch within a mission. Only once did we notice a tiny bit of environmental pop-up, during a mid-mission switchover, but with several months to go this is likely to be further ironed out – it's extraordinary, really, that Rockstar's open world tech can handle these transitions so beautifully, especially when one of your chaps is on the other side of the game world. The loading times alone are impressive, really, yet it's the prospect of instantaneously experiencing another part of Los Santos through the eyes of a different character in mere seconds that offers a potential revolution of the way we play open world games.

If *GTA IV*'s add-on packs illustrated anything, it's that with the right framework, Rockstar's rich environments can sustain multiple heroes with different perspectives on the same locale (there's also a sense of this in the *LA Noire* missions where Cole Phelps is swapped out for PI Jack Kelso). Indeed, Michael, Franklin and Trevor all have their own sets of friends, lifestyles and neighbourhoods to enhance that individuality; hopping between these three very distinctive viewpoints houses a lot of creative potential in terms of storytelling.

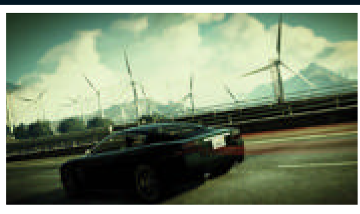
Rockstar describes it to us as like a TV show: three characters with very separate lives, whose storylines intertwine at key moments. There's only so much we can learn about each from the brief cutscene we glimpse before 'Blitz Play', but we can't help but get a contemporary Tommy Vercetti vibe from Michael – there's something of a modern day Ray Liotta character (see *Killing Them Softly*) quality about this former bank robber in witness protection, this slightly outrageous figure who should probably know better.

On top of this high-concept switching idea, then, you have numerous other distractions to swallow your time in Los Santos. Base-jumping returns from *Gay Tony*, along with hunting minigames, ATV races and the already-revealed sports (golf, tennis, triathlons, yoga and biking, which are promised as being rather in-depth). Tattoos, clothes and haircuts can be customised, and vehicle tweaking makes a return from San Andreas, too. Sure, you can't get fat on pizza and burgers, but all of these small things will allow us to leave an imprint on *GTA V* that we couldn't in *GTA IV* – the ability to buy properties and businesses should really put your money to work. There's a lot here that seems to directly address *GTA IV*'s detractors.

What we wanted to see in this first gameplay demo was the scale of San Andreas married to the detail of *GTA IV*, and *GTA V* appears to grant that wish. It should be the logical conclusion of this console generation in many ways, the highest-end in terms of environmental design, as well as a reinvention of what we perceive as the staples of *GTA*. As a series, *Grand Theft Auto* has always felt so complete in the experience it offers, a franchise that appeals to tens of millions of people despite feeling very much like a specific creator's piece. If Rockstar's brave experiments with structure, pacing and world-building pay off, that appeal is likely to feel renewed once more.

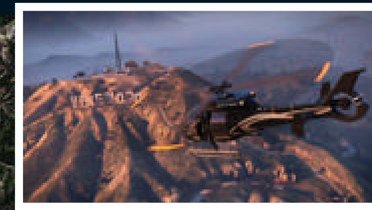
LS CONFIDENTIAL

The real-life locations we've seen emulated in GTA V so far, across trailers and gameplay



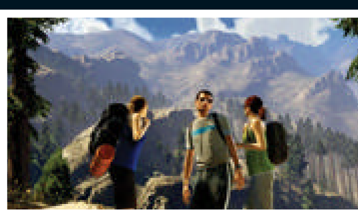
TEHACHAPI WIND FARM

■ Lots of pretty windmills add a bit of flavour to the environment (although UK village protestors would claim otherwise). Of course, it'll have a different name in *GTA V*.



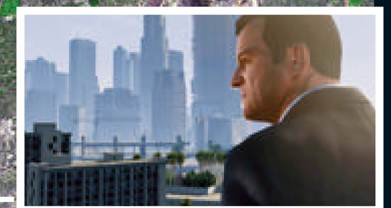
HOLLYWOOD

■ Not as shiny as it seems on TV and in the movies, Hollywood is faithfully reinterpreted once again as Vinewood by Rockstar. *LA Noire*'s take on Hollywood was also spot-on.



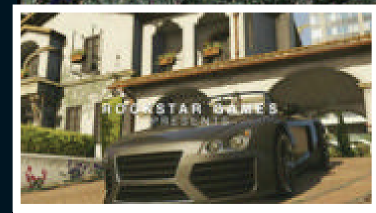
MOUNT DIABLO

■ Known as Mount Chiliad in *San Andreas* and *GTA V*, there are no doubt some fun jumps to be performed once you've scaled this beast.



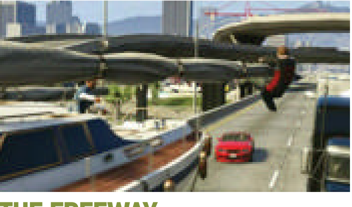
DOWNTOWN LA

■ The central area in LA, and likely to be the most classically *GTA*-seeming environment in Los Santos, too. The skyline is replicated almost perfectly.



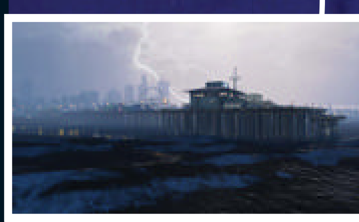
BEVERLY HILLS

■ Referred to as Rockford Hills, this is where Michael resides with his overindulged wife and kids.



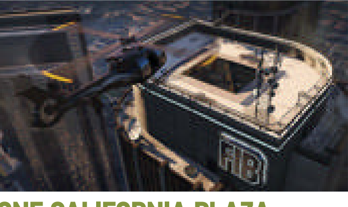
THE FREEWAY

■ A massive winding structure that, in real life, looks like a *Rollercoaster Tycoon* ride gone wrong. Naturally, it's represented in *GTA V*.



SANTA MONICA PIER

■ The most beautiful part of LA in real life, Santa Monica is like a gorgeous British seaside town dropped into the middle of America.



ONE CALIFORNIA PLAZA

■ This immense skyscraper has been reappropriated as the FIB's headquarters in *GTA V*, and is likely to be the setting for one mission at the very least.

DARK SOULS II: BY THE HARDCORE FOR THE HARDCORE

Too easy? A focus on bringing in new gamers? Worry not. From Software wants you to die, die and die again – we've seen Dark Souls II in action, as co-director Yui Tanimura talks us through the hardcore-centric sequel…

YES, SO WE did use the word accessible – by all means we did not intend for that to be communicated as making the game easier," explains *Dark Souls II*'s co-director Yui Tanimura, in case you were worried. That was the primary concern for the sequel's unveiling last year, as hardened veterans panicked about a neutered challenge waiting within the ambitious sequel, such is the dread that is inspired within hardcore gamers upon use of the word 'accessible'. If there's one thing that From Software relays to us upon demoing *Dark Souls II*, it's that this is a sequel created for those who endured weeks and weeks of death to conquer the 2011 original.

"Obviously, the game is not going to become easier," Tanimura elaborates. "What we did mean by making it more accessible was to try to streamline away all of the tediousness, I guess, and cut away all the fat so we can really deliver a lean, direct and pure challenging experience for players out there. So we apologise for casually using the word accessible, please understand that the difficulty will maintain. The goal is not to make *Dark Souls II* more difficult – that's not the intent – but the intent is to provide a more rewarding experience by being able to overcome all the difficulties, so it's hard to directly compare which one's going to be more difficult, but we'll



“Obviously, the game is not going to become easier”

CO-DIRECTOR YUI TANIMURA

VARIATION IN LEVEL DESIGN WILL ELEVATE *DARK SOULS II*, AS FROM SOFTWARE PLAYS WITH PACING.

try to maintain the same experience in *Dark Souls II*." While *Dark Souls II* was considered for next-gen consoles, especially given the similar timings of their release, From Software eventually decided that there's still plenty of mileage in the PS3 and 360.

The engine has been completely reconstructed – many of the sequences we see, particularly those that place the player within interior locations, run crisply. The original had notorious issues when it came to the frame rate, so this will hopefully allow *Dark Souls* to thrive in more of a technical capacity.





With the advent of next-gen consoles, however, we have to ask Tanimura how likely it is we'll see *Dark Souls II* making an appearance on that hardware. "We understand that next-gen is coming up, and it'd be a lie to say we didn't consider it at all, but right now there's no intent to have *Dark Souls* on next-gen at this point. We feel the potential for the current gen is still there and we want to deliver to current-gen consoles."

We're shown something of a gameplay montage, spotlighting the still unrelenting difficulty of the sequel – exotic deaths that involve getting an axe between the eyes, being thrashed from behind by a nasty troll-like creature and even being rammed off a cliff after gesturing to some little pig-like monsters. The best bit, however, involves crossing a rope bridge to a location known as the Dragon Altar, which looks precarious, and is made more threatening by the sight of groups of wyverns circling the air above it (so many, in fact, that the frame-rate slows slightly at the sight of it – we expect this will be fixed down the line). One winged beast swoops down, breaking the bridge, and the whole thing collapses, sending the player into the abyss.

It's actually pretty funny. The imagination behind these scenarios appears to be the element that From Software is investing the most



THE SINISTER ENVIRONMENTS AREN'T ANY LESS OPPRESSIVE, YOU'LL BE PLEASED TO HEAR.

in, bringing variety to the deaths that'll surprise players, while also shedding light on their mistakes to learn the next time around. That's the cycle of *Dark Souls* as a series, obviously – clearly, From Software wanted to demonstrate that this was still the lifeblood of *Dark Souls II*, and that use of the word 'accessible' wasn't designed to scare off hardcore fans.

Indeed, in terms of setpieces, the examples we see display the kind of creativity that indicate From Software is on track – a couple of other examples, including a giant dragon skeleton that comes to life before attacking you, and a large ogre-like creature locked behind a prison door, who smashes his way through to you after being provoked with a stray arrow from your bow. Bringing down the wall, this fearsome beast shows that challenges will take many forms in the second *Dark Souls* title.

The bridge to the Dragon Altar certainly seemed like one of the more difficult setpieces, and tweaking high-concept ideas like that remains a huge challenge for Tanimura and his team. "The balancing between those is extremely difficult," the co-director explains. "It's something we always keep in mind. But one thing we do focus on is, no matter what kind of death we want the players to experience, we make sure that players understand the reasoning

"It'd be a lie to say we didn't consider it at all, but there's no intent to have Dark Souls II on next-gen" CO-DIRECTOR YUI TANIMURA



■ THIS PARTICULAR CREATURE MERGES DARK FANTASY WITH THINGS YOU FEAR SEEING IN YOUR TOILET.



■ AFTER SCARING FANS WITH THE WORD 'ACCESSIBLE', FROM SOFTWARE DEMONSTRATES HOW TOUGH *DARK SOULS II* IS.



for dying. Killing players is obviously easy – you can make an enemy invincible and make them so strong that you die. But I think it's important that players understand the reasons for their deaths, and to make sure that they learn from their deaths, and that's a fine balance, but we always keep in mind to make sure it's fair, and to make sure there's a reason to each of the situations in the game."

He goes on to explain the bridge to the Dragon Altar scenario specifically. "That bridge incident is actually sort of a surprise feature, I guess – we want to express the emotions of 'Oh my god! What do I do now? Okay, no bridge – how do I get past this part?' And what's behind that is, we want the players to think about what to do next and think of their own ways to conquer that area. Obviously we don't want to do it so every time you go on the bridge, you die no matter what – that's not the case. We'll leave hints and clues to allow players to anticipate what's going to happen. If they try to cross the bridge, they'll probably die, as you saw, but there's emotional takeback that we want from each of the situations like the bridge that we're trying to communicate. So hopefully players, when they play the game, will understand that everything has a certain amount of meaning in terms of deaths or successes."

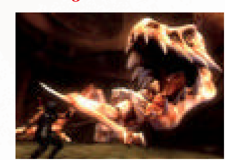


The incremental storytelling details still make *Dark Souls II*, conveying the kind of narrative that makes players feel like the tale is unique to them. We see a giant sword sticking out of the side of an environment, clutched by a disembodied hand, where you can cautiously walk outside onto the blade (an enemy waits at the end, throwing an axe between the eyes of the player's character). Earlier on, we catch a glimpse of a horrible bloody statue, lit up by the glow of one of the environment's bonfires. The afore-mentioned dragon skeleton brought the element of surprise – the ideas are consistently excellent. From Software wants variation to be pronounced not just in the setpieces, however, but in the structure of the experience, which is a far more complicated design challenge than producing moment-to-moment thrills.

THE WORTHY HARDCORE

Modern hardcore titles that provide a worthy – not cheap – challenge to their loyal players

NINJA GAIDEN



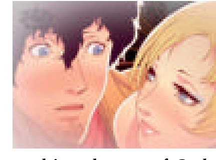
■ The original *Ninja Gaiden* rewarded precision and timing, while having a lot of imagination when it came to enemy design. The second entry was a little too cheap in some of its obstacles to be given the same credit, really.

SUPER MEAT BOY



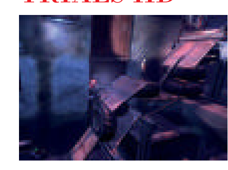
■ The zenith of post-modern 2D platformers, as well as a pleasing success story for its developers, *Super Meat Boy* is a punishing but ultimately satisfying game that deservedly found itself a willing audience.

CATHERINE



■ Few games have a core gameplay concept that's so detached from its guiding narrative, but the block-pushing element of *Catherine* is certainly rewarding with the right level of patience. The story makes it worth persevering with.

TRIALS HD



■ Try, try and try again. *Trials* is a sacrifice of spare time, a ghoulishly addictive game of precision where skill really does pay off, providing you're not the type to start lobbing controllers about the place (which we'd also understand).

DARK SOULS/DEMONS' SOULS



■ We'll throw the two of them in together, since they're spiritually linked – *Dark Souls* is the poster child of the worthy hardcore gaming experience, where facing up to insane odds will eventually pay off.

5 Deaths We've Seen In Dark Souls II



1 BEATEN FROM BEHIND BY A SNEAKY ENEMY

■ While fighting one in front, no less, in the dark. Taking on two large creatures at once ends badly.

2 KNOCKED OFF A CLIFF BY SMALL CREATURES

■ Again, this was a funny one. Even the tiniest enemies in *Dark Souls II* offer a pretty nasty threat.

3 AXE BETWEEN THE EYES

■ Precise, pointy and unexpected. The slow and steady approach towards foes doesn't pay off in this scenario.

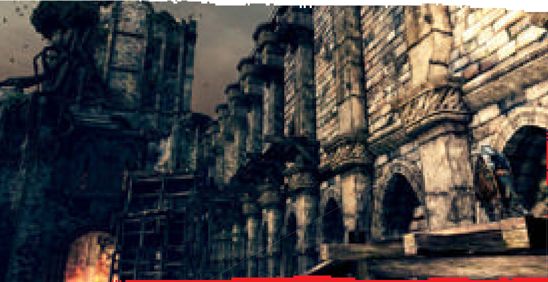
4 DEATH BY CHARIOT

■ A chariot runs the player down after randomly trundling around the corner of a torture chamber. Amusing.

5 A BRIDGE COLLAPSES, SENDING THE PLAYER INTO THE ABYSS

■ This was the most dramatic one, as a wyvern destroys your only route to a key location. How will you proceed from here?





LEARNING ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH PAYING ATTENTION TO SMALL DETAILS IS STILL KEY HERE.

IF SEEING *DARK SOULS II* IN ACTION TAUGHT US SOMETHING, IT'S THAT ENEMIES REALLY DO POP UP IN EVERY POSSIBLE SCENARIO.

From Software explains this by taking us into a setting that has far fewer enemies, with more of a horror-oriented tone; the idea presumably being that you head around the next corner always expecting a swarm of foes to send you back. The use of light and dark is crucial to this, too – players can now manoeuvre around in the dark using a torch, just to add some extra tension in the run up to your next death. Horror genre-averse players might find it a little scary, yet it's another element for From Software to play with in building more surprising levels for *Dark Souls II*.

Tanimura explains the team's modus operandi in creating a *Dark Souls* level. "The way I look at level design is, first I try to concrete the concept of what we want the players to feel, what emotional takeback or feedback the player gets from the experience. And with that, we try to design what kind of death they will face, and what kind of challenges and what kind of tactics we want the players to learn from. So we'll have that concept as a base and based on that, we will then discuss how we want people to conquer this or what kind of death we want them to experience and what kind of learning we want them to take back from the challenges in the game."

There's still an obvious visual design thread between the two games, of course – that dark fantasy look is still the prevalent style of the game. The thought process behind some of these new environmental ideas is increasing the range of reactions From Software can provoke from players. "In terms of the design of the world and the enemies, we carry the same design concepts," Tanimura says. "But because for this game we wanted to implement variations of the types of deaths for the emotional takeback of the fans, depending on what we want to communicate and how we want to kill players, will determine what sort of enemies we create. Again, designs of the enemies and characters will depend on what we want players to feel."

Improvements come from elsewhere, too – reconstructing its engine will hopefully allow From Software to avoid the frame-rate issues that sometimes made an appearance in the original game. "Yes, one of the reasons we implemented a new engine was to cater for that drop in frame-rate in *Dark Souls*, so again for this title we're hoping users don't have to worry about that issue. We think the new engine will help to solve [this]."

There's little hint that new players are the focus for *Dark Souls II* – while the different story and setting are likely to offer a good jumping on point for rookie players, this is so clearly built for veterans who experienced absolutely everything of the original *Dark Souls*. The first title wasn't just a rare breed in terms of its difficulty compared to contemporary mainstream games, but also in its compulsive relationship with players, in becoming a modern cult classic.

That's unlikely to change. From Software's relationship with publisher Namco Bandai is one that Tanimura says is key to maintaining the developer's independence in making *Dark Souls II*. "Namco Bandai gives us a lot of freedom in terms of what we want to create, and we as From Software are really able to pursue what we want to deliver to the fans, so the relationship there is great.

"Obviously From Software as compared to Namco Bandai is a small company – Namco Bandai is a much larger company, so I think a lot of the feedback from the fans and how Namco Bandai can access fan feedback is a lot larger than what From Software can, so that type of input from the publisher in terms of what fans are expecting is very useful for us in terms of taking into consideration and deciding on certain aspects of the game, so the relationship we have between the publisher and developer is a good one in that we have the freedom to create what we want to create. But at the same time, we have the feedback of a larger audience as well."

In terms of online metrics, there wasn't a lot From Software could learn from *Dark Souls*' P2P features, so direct fan feedback is still crucial for the developer. "That's why we were able to go back to player feedback," Tanimura says. "It's not that we're going to take in all player feedback and answer all of them, but we do take into consideration in how we want to balance *Dark Souls II*."

That should change after *Dark Souls II*, which uses server-based play for the first time, and is therefore something that From Software can adapt to in terms of design. "In terms of network, again, there will be follow-up information, but because this game is going to be server-based now, we hope to implement new aspects into the game that can be done only because it's server-based. We want to utilise that as much as possible to deliver some new experiences to fans."

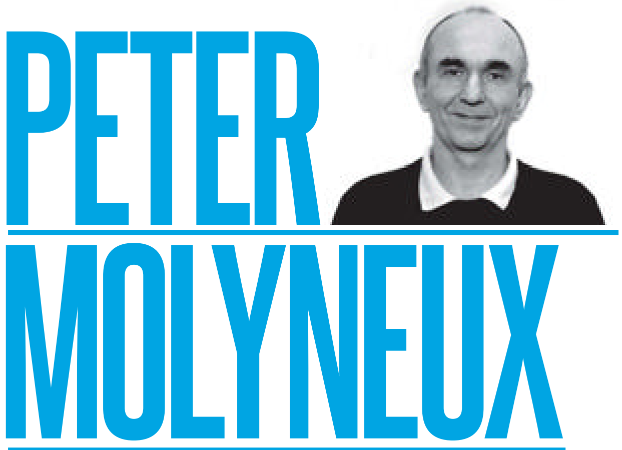
It's comforting that the focus of *Dark Souls II*, at this point, is in showing us From Software's ingenuity as game designers through incremental storytelling and environmental detail. There's little that needed altering about *Dark Souls*' mechanics – it's more about From Software showing us things we haven't seen before and instilling that sense of wonder that comes with any well-crafted adventure. *Dark Souls* remains a hardcore venture for the passionately obsessed; accessible doesn't seem to be written into its language.

> "What we want to communicate and how we want to kill players will determine what sort of enemies we create"
> CO-DIRECTOR YUI TANIMURA













TWO OF BRITAIN'S MOST EMINENT VIDEOGAME LUMINARIES

Inside the offices of Square Enix in London, **games™** joins two of the UK's most influential and renowned representatives of the videogames industry. They're sitting in a boardroom emblazoned with *Tomb Raider* art, heartily chuckling and exchanging genial jibes as they conclude a discussion. With a friendship that has spanned nearly twenty years, Ian Livingstone and Peter Molyneux share a rapport that fizzles with youthful exuberance. "We were obviously clearly aware of each others' work," says Livingstone of how the two came to meet, as the two pause the insults momentarily to comment reverentially of each other's work. "I think I first met Peter after I sold Games Workshop in 1992 and I became a director of Domark and we licensed some of your – Peter, what was it? Mega-CD? We licensed a couple of properties."

"Did you? Did you pay us money?" responds Molyneux. "Yes. And we didn't get much for it, I must say!" It's soon apparent that this good-natured banter would set the tone for the ensuing two hours in the company of these old friends. One well-known for founding Eidos Interactive, launching Games Workshop and penning the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks and who is now life president of Eidos at Square Enix; the other for co-founding Bullfrog Productions and Lionhead





& IAN LIVINGSTONE







EXAMINE THE STATE OF THE TODAY'S TURBULENT INDUSTRY

Studios, and his role as creative director at Microsoft Game Studios before leaving to start 22Cans.

While their careers have diverged into many diverse sectors of the industry, the two remain in regular contact, joining together every few weeks for Livingstone's fabled 'Games Night' – an evening of board games hosted by Livingstone and shared with four other industry veterans. "I do a newsletter every session," says Livingstone. "We're on issue 387 now, I think. It keeps a record of all the totals of the games played. It's a spoof gentleman's club in a very reverent way of just old blokes in the games industry playing boards games smiling while stabbing each other in the back." Conversation then shifts to this year's Games Night winner and who will take home the trophy – which has every winner since 1986 inscribed on its frame. Naturally, this offers another opportunity to unleash a little more teasing. Molyneux: "What the bloody hell is going on with those side burns?" Livingstone: "You've got a bank manager's haircut going on." Despite the mockery, this reunion offers an opportunity for both parties to eschew the traditional themes of media enquiries, instead posing each other questions and musing on shared points of interest. **games™** records the two reflecting on an industry they have witnessed advance intensely over the course of nearly three decades.



IAN LIVINGSTONE Do you think you'll ever make another console game?

PETER MOLYNEUX That's a very interesting question. I love the idea of the epicness that console games bring. If you think like that, you can see there's a future for them, but when you start to think of things that are smaller, experimental and innovative, I don't really think that consoles are there for me any more. The innovation and experimental side has always been on PC, that's always been a bit underground and that's not the case anymore with this thing [points to iPad]. Do I have ideas in my mind big enough for an epic console game? Probably, yeah. Will I ever go back to creatively running a 100-150-person team? I'm not sure.

L What is it? The daily grind over two or three years with huge teams in which you only play a small part and then it's out there and gone? Is that a deterrent or do you find the new ways to express yourself creatively on these smartphone devices more interesting to you?

M I just feel at the moment that there is so much turbulence, so much change and so much diversity happening out there, that by the time you start a console project and then take it through to completion over two years, the industry has changed so much. It's no longer the cutting edge. Console gaming was the cutting edge up until two or three years ago. When the world of entertainment changes so much and so quickly, and when the devices we play on change so much and so quickly, that tradition of knowing what you're going to get of console games is going to be something we have to deal with.

L I think you're going to see fewer titles but they're going to get even bigger.

M You're totally right.

L I wouldn't wipe the console era off just yet. It's very mature at this moment in time, but who knows what opportunities will happen in the next iteration?

M The question is: do I want to cash my current generation in for the new generation? There's definitely a price sensitivity. They're not the must-have gadgets they used to be.

L Clearly the platform of choice for indies and consumers is smartphones and tablets. Connected devices playing bitesize chunks of gaming to be played wherever you like, whenever you like with whomever you like.

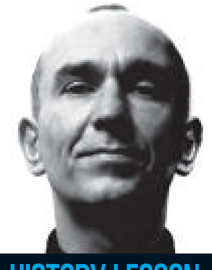
M All those likes…[laughs]

L And you're competing with free. Free at the point of delivery, anyway.

M The interesting point is that where you said you know what you're going to get on the epic game side, you don't know what you're going to get on this side [points to iPad]. None of the rules have been defined. Before I got here, I was discussing how we were going to handle our GUI [for *Godus*]. That's easy on console; we all know what's on the top left-hand corner of the screen and the top-right hand corner of the screen. But on this, there is none of those set in stone yet. That means it's up for grabs, up for innovation, up for thinking again.



■ Molyneux turned to Kickstarter to raise the funding for his follow-up to *Curiosity*.



HISTORY LESSON: PETER MOLYNEUX

- **1982:** Molyneux begins his career by selling floppy discs containing videogames for Atari and Commodore 64.
- **1984:** He creates his first game *The Entrepreneur* – a text-based business simulator.
- **1985:** After the failure of *The Entrepreneur*, he sells baked beans to the Middle East. After a miscommunication, Commodore International commissions Molyneux to port software.
- **1987:** Founded Bullfrog. Creates the concept for *Populous*.
- **1989:** *Populous* is released selling over 4 million copies.
- **1994:** Molyneux becomes an Electronic Arts consultant.
- **1995:** Bullfrog is acquired by Electronic Arts.
- **1997:** *Dungeon Keeper* is released – Molyneux's last game for Bullfrog.
- **1997:** Opens Lionhead Studios and begins work on the ambitious *Black & White*.
- **2001:** *Black & White* is finally released after a tumultuous development period in which Molyneux pays $6 million from his own pocket.
- **2006:** Lionhead Studios is acquired by Microsoft Game Studios.
- **2009:** In June 2009, Molyneux is promoted to creative director of Microsoft Game Studios.
- **2012:** Molyneux announced his departure from Lionhead and Microsoft and opens independent studio 22Cans.



L The beauty about these devices and Facebook to a degree is that they broaden the whole market and it's not at the expense of the console. They're living alongside each other. But there's this whole new raft of gamers who wouldn't have ordinarily have considered themselves gamers, or ever have gone near a game because a controller with fifteen buttons is quite intimidating. With tablets, Apple nailed the user interface with swipe technology.

M What would you pay for a good iPad title?

L Well, I think something like *Blood Of The Zombies* is definitely worth £3.99 [laughs].

M [Laughs] Should we have a quick look at it?

L It's interesting, some people think 69p is expensive – it's the cost of a packet of crisps.

M No. I mean in development terms. How much do you think is too much to pay for development?

L I don't think you can answer that question. *A Clash Of Clans* and *Hay Day* earnings supersede a million dollars a day. They probably cost them a hundred grand each to make, plus the cost of the live team adding new content. It probably cost them a day's revenue to make both those games. You can't really put a price on it. The important thing to me is that if you're making something for free it has to be an amazing experience.

M When Mark Pincus [Zynga CEO] came along and said '80 per cent of our development is done after the launch of the game' we all thought 'That's it! We don't have to finish games anymore!'

L He was just saying that you serve the consumer with the minimum viable product and rather you thinking on behalf of your consumer what they *might* like, they tell you through analytics what they *do* like. You give them more of what they do like and less of what they don't.

M That was misinterpreted by a few people that you don't have to finish your game before you launch it. That is one of the scary things: behind your app there are a million other apps scrambling over it trying to reach that top spot.

L It does also tell you that the primacy of the games developer as having über control



Peter Molyneux's team at the Guildford-based 22Cans - currently working on *Project Godus.*

of the content is over. The market decides what they like and don't like. It's the democratisation of design.

M No, I think you're wrong. At last I think the designer's day is here. Because I can act like a design god…

L Through playing *Godus*, clearly [laughs].

M **Well, now I can change any aspect of the game I like at any time. That is being a real designer. Being a designer is reacting, not just thinking of fantastic ideas. Surely publishers are the problem now?**

L They still play a role. They play a role that some developers do not understand because they're publishers themselves now. And bits that they wouldn't have ordinarily done remain very challenging: marketing, gaining audience, monetisation, and running a business. These are skills that some developers don't have and need to. The App Store is the world's smallest shop window, and for every *Angry Birds* there are at least ten thousand dead birds. It's all about discovery. They have to understand not just social media and say the word virality, there is an awful lot of real marketing that has to go on behind the scenes and they have to buy that audience. This 'viral audience' is a bit of a myth.

M User acquisition is one area, but it's different because it's money you're spending. Eventually publishers will have enough portfolio to do cross-product marketing. That has got to be the most powerful weapon they have got, but there is no one really dominant on here [iPad] to play that card. I'm all for publishers, by the way. Every game I've ever done has gone through a publisher.

L It's worth giving up a few points if they're going to take the pain away.

M Yeah.

L It's better to have 50 per cent of 100 million sales than 100 per cent of 10 million sales.

M **Are we negotiating?**

L Absolutely not.

M I'll tell you my terms.

L I think these are very exciting times. The second golden age of games is upon us. We were talking about democracy with content owners able to reach global audiences directly, interface with their users directly, you're taking the gatekeepers out of the mix in terms of retail and the other traditional gatekeeper was the finance house, the banks, so with crowd funding it's the democratisation of finance.

> "The question is: do I want to cash my current generation in for the new generation?"
> PETER MOLYNEUX

Price is a sensitive point for Molyneux in regards to next-generation consoles.



Both Molyneux and Livingstone agree that Nintendo should consider making *Mario*-based apps.



"Hardware has always been a bit of a mug's game. If you were head of Nintendo wouldn't you be tempted to say 'Well, forget all this stuff, let's just put Mario on iPad?'"

IAN LIVINGSTONE

■ Livingstone admires the business model of free-to-play games, such as *Clash Of Clans.*

■ Both Molyneux and Livingstone question the commercial appeal of the new wave of alternative consoles.

■ Livingstone seeks rescue during one of Molyneux's lengthy rejoinders.



Livingstone uses *Tomb Raider* as an example of British ingenuity now owned overseas.

L You recently crowd-funded *Godus* – how was that for you, Peter?

M I think the first thing you have to do is rely upon your friends. That's the golden rule. Remember to rely upon your friends and the people that you trust to support you in your efforts on Kickstarter.

L I do remember not pledging [laughs].

M I can't recall exactly how much my friends from Games Night pledged…

L I think it was zero.

M That just shows you the relationship we have.

L I think I tweeted it somewhere… when I had nothing else to do.

M Kickstarter is an amazing experience and everyone should try it, but it's not for the faint-hearted. There are so many things that you've got to get across, especially with an original idea.

L Do you think if *Godus* had been put up on Kickstarter by Fred Bloggs and co. it would've got the money?

M I think it would've struggled.

L So you need a track record or a rock proposition like Ouya?

M Someone should do some very simple analytics: what are the successful products that are original ideas? Not with the words 'based on' or 'inspired by' written in their description. I can see when Chris Roberts or when Richard Garriot has just kicked one off, those are all people that have left the industry and this is a way to bring them back. Brilliant! I'm there, I'm pledging. But if it is some unknown concept from some unknown team you've got to pull a lot of favours.

L What about the people that have gone off the idea? Those that have pulled in the money but are not going to deliver – what is going to happen when all *that* first bad press comes out?

M There are going to be some Kickstarter tragedies and some Kickstarter successes and it'll be fascinating to see what comes out of it. Lets not forget that one of the temptations when you're Kickstarting is that you'll say virtually anything because of this fantastic rollercoaster ride you're on. Every Kickstarter is the same: they start off brilliantly. There's fatal thing called Kicktrack – have you seen Kicktrack?

L No.

M It's brilliant. You go onto Kicktrack and it tells you based on your current velocity how much you're going to make. Day one 'Oh my god, it's five million pounds! I'm going to make five million pounds and I've only asked for 450,000!' Of course, it's a basic regression curve. By day two you're down to four million and by the time you're at day five you're basically unable to pay the coffee bill. You get this incredible lull.

L It's right at the top and goes down and then gets high at the end again.

M Yeah. And I asked myself 'Who are these people that pledge at the end?' I just couldn't understand it. As a pledger you can see who pledged – hence I knew that Ian Livingstone pledged *nothing* to my Kickstarter at all.

L And proud of it. I'm looking for something free from you Peter; I can't bring myself to give you money.

M Anyway, 90 per cent of people that pledge in the last three days are serial Kickstarters. What that means is that there is a section of people out there, amazing people, who check Kickstarter everyday and pounce on closing projects. One person in particular had pledged on 700 other projects. His house must be stuffed with useless pledging rewards. If he's married his wife must be sick of signed portraits, or pink wallets.

L Having put out *Curiosity* and about to put out *Godus*, you sold Bullfrog to EA, you sold Lionhead to Microsoft, you became part of the Microsoft hierarchy – do you now consider yourself an indie?

M Absolutely.

L On what basis?

M There was this line going through my head only a few months ago and that was 'I've remembered who I really am.'

L It's where you feel comfortable in yourself?

M Yeah. It's the sensation of bringing together the twenty people as we are now who are obsessively passionate about one thing. It's amazing.

L Do you think it's our desire as a nation to have limited ambition? Instead of being like the Americans and scaling it to these huge multi-nationals where you feel no ownership of it at all other than being part of a brand.

M I think the British are good at making stuff that doesn't exist already. Part of that is because we don't quite view risk in quite the same way as other people do. Is this a sensible thing for a 54 year-old to do? No, it's not. It's hugely risky, stupidly risky. But I think British people don't mind taking that risk and that risk drives innovation.

L We're very good at creating intellectual property; we're just not always very good at hanging onto it.

M We're terrible at exportation but brilliant at innovation. What I mean is that we can moan about how other people exploit our stuff, we can moan about that, but there really aren't many good examples in this industry of where we have taken something and made it huge. Your heritage is pretty good.

L Games Workshop?

M With *Tomb Raider* and Lara.

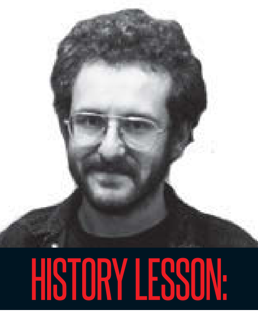
L Now developed in Redwood City and owned by Tokyo Stock Exchange. This shining piece of British creativity and design.

M Yeah, but, let's look at the breast size: it's much more Japanese, isn't it?

L Let's just put the record straight on that: Crystal Dynamics had total creative control and autonomy with the new Lara Croft. I think it's a reflection of the age we live.

M It was something that was created here…

L Well, it was exactly what I was saying. We're very good at creating something but we're not always great at retaining the ownership.



HISTORY LESSON: IAN LIVINGSTONE

- **1974:** Ian Livingstone, Steve Jackson and John Peake, the three Shepherd's Bush flat mates, start their own business, Games Workshop. Opens in 1975.
- **1982:** Livingstone and Jackson release the first entry in the *Fighting Fantasy* series of gamebooks.
- **MID-1980S:** Livingstone contributed design work to Domark.
- **1992:** Livingstone becomes deputy chairman of Domark.
- **1995:** Domark merges with Eidos and Livingstone serves as executive chairman of the board of the new interactive board until 2002.
- **2003:** Appointed creative industries advisor to the British Council.
- **2005:** Livingstone leaves Eidos after the company was taken over by SCi Entertainment Group. He returns later in the year as product acquisition director.
- **2006:** Awarded an OBE in the New Year's Honours List for his contribution to the computer games industry.
- **2009:** Ian is promoted to life president of Eidos.
- **2012:** *Wired* magazine ranks Ian as the 16th most influential person in the UK's digital economy.



The 'Games Night' players: Livingstone, Molyneux, Clive Robert, Steve Jackson, Skye Quin and Mark Spangenthal.

IN CONVERSATION WITH...

Molyneux and Livingstone's friendship stretches back twenty years, when the two met over business.

L What worries you about the industry today?

M I think we have got to start realising that we're a broad and diverse industry. If the people who are influential about making policy try to compartmentalise there, I think we're going to make some mistakes. I would say as well, and this is somewhat contentious, but I do think that the console manufacturers have to wake up to this very different world we're in now. In the time it has taken them to announced their next generation hardware, these things [points to iPad] have gone through two or three iterations.

L I'm surprised there are so many people who want to get into hardware now, with the Steam Box, NVidia getting into it, Ouya and the GameStick. Hardware has always been a bit of a mug's game. If you were head of Nintendo wouldn't you be tempted to say 'Well, forget all this stuff, lets just put Mario on iPad.' Would you put Mario on iPad?

M Of course I would! I tell you the thing that everyone is obsessed about in hardware terms and its input 1 on the TV. There is this stat that came out (and I can't remember the exact stat), that there is going to be 10 billion [dollars] spent on what is the new input 1 on the television. So everyone is fighting for it rather being your Sky box or your direct aerial, it could be an Xbox or PlayStation.

M What happened with the UK tax relief for developers? I thought you had it all in control?

L It is in control. It's just a slight delay. As the EU go over the fine details, I'm 100 per cent certain it's going to happen, it just couldn't happen on the budget day. It's outside of this government's control.

M So when do you think it'll be ready? I'm looking at cash flow…

L I'd say imminent.

M This government?

L I would say this year. I'd say this half of the year.

M Are you willing to put money down on the table on that? A little side bet?

L If it doesn't happen I'll retroactively fund *Godus* [laughs].

M This is the ultimate test: I'll bet you five Game Nights points.

L I don't bet Game Nights points. That's just a currency I simply do not trade.

M Seriously, it would be fantastic to get that. And you've done a very good job, Ian.

L And others of course. The UK over time unfortunately became a place where the costs were high and the skills were low. We had to redress that by having high skills and low costs. We had to redress that so we had high skills and low costs and obviously getting the tax credits is going to create a more level playing field to be able to compete with Quebec, France and parts of the United States. It's going to be great. And now kids that are programming are going to empower our creatives with skills to make the next generation of computer games. I mean, when did you start? Was it the Spectrum?

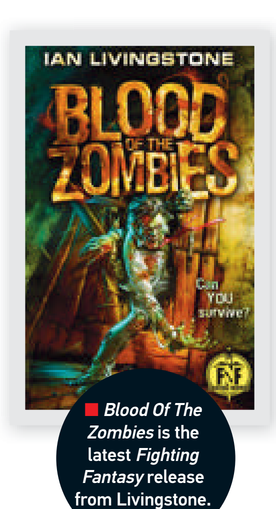
M Spectrum? I wasn't a Speccy! I was a BBC Micro, Acorn guy.

L The point is that in the Eighties kids were programming in their schools and in their home. All that got lost over time as networks and computers got locked down and we became simply passive users and that was a tragedy. Over thirty years we became users and not creators. We effectively taught our kids how to read but not how to write.

M And the price we pay for that is long and has a huge hangover. Britain became this place to go to get stuff from and not invest in. The number of people that were just sucked away to Canada and Australia – it's about time it stopped.

"Over thirty years we became users and not creators. We effectively taught our kids how to read but not how to write"

IAN LIVINGSTONE



Blood Of The Zombies is the latest *Fighting Fantasy* release from Livingstone.

L But what about when its going to be 'Nobox'?

M Exactly.

L Software embedded into smart TVs connected to the internet. We're *in* the Nobox society.

M The consumers I think will pick the path of least resistance. The thing that is simplest to do, the easiest delightful setup. That's what Apple gets right. The experience starts when you buy the box, not when you plug in all the leads. To keep all those brilliant epic console games, to keep them alive and to keep their investment we need the hardware manufactures to realise that they need to be part of this incredibly nimble and ever changing world. So I just want consoles to be around forever. I don't want them to start being like my Hi-Fi. I don't buy Hi-Fis anymore. We used to be excited about all this different Hi-Fi [brands]. They've got to be cutting edge and I just hope that's what they are.

L More importantly, who is going to be Games Night champion this year?

M Well, it's not going to be me. My nickname at Games Night is Helpline.

L No matter whose turn it is, Peter is there saying 'You should be doing this! Move your piece there!'

M I'm always right, though.

L Yeah, but I'm winning right now.

M This is the bizarre thing; Ian is in charge of keeping the scores and writing the newsletter…

L Are you questioning my integrity?



The Future Noir Of Cyberpunk 2077

A key part of the Eighties sci-fi boom, seminal role-playing board game Cyberpunk helped define the fundamentals of future noir. games™ discusses the series' conception with its esteemed creator Mike Pondsmith and the upcoming next generation RPG with The Witcher studio, CD Projekt Red



Cyber-psychos are those who have continually augmented themselves with cybernetic enhancements, and in so doing lose their humanity, slaughtering the meatbags around them.

It has a certain quality that is generated by being up at two in the morning, walking out of a closing bar in South of Market, San Francisco, and going 'So what now?'" says Mike Pondsmith, creator of the *Cyberpunk* role-playing games, and co-creator of the *Cyberpunk 2077* videogame.

From a young age, Mike Pondsmith has been fascinated with making and playing games. During his formative years, Mike never thought he would be able to make a career from designing games, as it was unheard of at the time. The irony of this is not lost on him: Pondsmith founded the game design company R Talsorian Games in 1985 to publish his games, winning a series of Origins Awards, including Gamer's Choice Award for *Cyberpunk 2020* in 1989.

It would not be unreasonable to say that Pondsmith is an ideal candidate for translating the world of *Cyberpunk 2020* into a videogame. Not only is he a prolific games designer, having created *Cyberpunk 2020* itself, as well as the *Mekton* and *Castle Falkenstein*; but he has also worked within the videogame industry. Shortly after leaving the University of California (Davis), with a degree in graphic design, Mike joined a videogame company where he worked until, in his own words, "It blew up – a long story which involves everything from cocaine to bill collectors." Later, Pondsmith joined Microsoft Games Studio as design manager in the early 2000s, before moving to Monolith Productions as a mission designer for *The Matrix Online.*

"My favourite movie is *Blade Runner*," confesses Pondsmith, referring to the inspiration behind the *Cyberpunk* role-playing game, "So I decided to make a *Blade Runner* game, as the whole cyberpunk thing was starting up." Oddly enough, when Mike first started developing *Cyberpunk 2013*, he had never heard of the seminal cyberpunk author William Gibson. Pondsmith's introduction to cyberpunk literature was through Walter John Williams' *Hardwired.* It was not until after the initial prototype for *Cyberpunk 2013* had been created that he read

Gibson's influential genre novel *Neuromancer* (which Gibson was well into writing before he saw *Blade Runner*).

Publishing *Cyberpunk 2013* was no easy task. "I likened it to being a novice surfer, when you're out there, and you've found a really good wave," Pondsmith explains. "You've paddled out, and you've starting to get up, and you're trying to get inside the curl and start moving on it. Then you look up and Corky Carroll and all the greatest surfers of all time are lining up on the wave with you, and you are going to have to fight for the wave, and you are going: 'I'm a rookie!' Everybody and their brother started announcing they were making cyberpunk games, but we were further along than everyone when we released it."

The success of the *Cyberpunk* role-playing game is down to it being the "perfect fantasy for a player," claims Pondsmith. "You're a badass in a leather trench-coat with all kinds of cyber-wear, all kinds of juicy enemies and strange things going on. One of the things that really attracted me (which is one of the things that attracted me to *Blade Runner*) was that the environment is fantastic and the tools are fantastic, but the people aren't fantastic. You could be this guy, assuming you were bad tempered enough and had taken the time to learn the weapons."

IT CAN'T BE BRIGHT AND SHINY AND SUNNY, IT CAN'T BE MONOCHROME, IT'S GOTTA HAVE THIS REALLY SPECIFIC FEEL. I ALWAYS CALL IT THE 'WET SAN FRANCISCO STREETS AT MIDNIGHT' FEELING

MIKE PONDSMITH

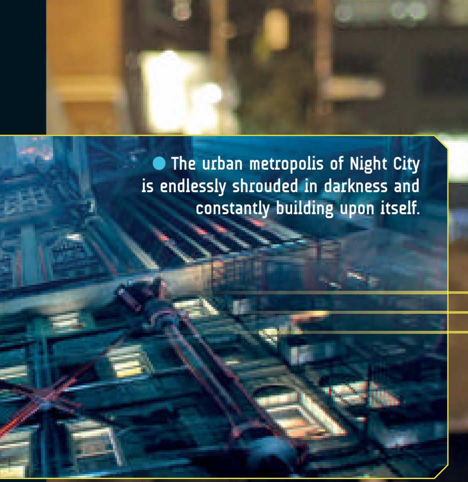
Since *Cyberpunk 2013* was released in 1988, there have been several attempts to translate this role-playing game of the dark future into a videogame. "There have been some fairly big players – which [non-disclosure agreements] do not allow me to discuss – but the upshot of that is usually a couple of things happen," says Pondsmith. "Either at some point the team breaks down because of external factors, like they can't get enough money together. I remember a memorable case where I really loved the prototype, and then the president of the company was drafted and had to go back into the military."

This all changed when Pondsmith received an email from CD Projekt RED, who had recently gained recognition with *The Witcher* series, expressing interest in creating a videogame based on *Cyberpunk 2020*. Pondsmith comments how CD Projekt RED's Michał Nowakowski likes to joke: "They had communism or cyberpunk, and that was it." By way of an introduction, they sent Pondsmith a copy of *The Witcher 2*, which impressed him, with how much it "was on the same level as *Ultima*."

The people at CD Projekt RED are undoubtedly gamers, and many have been playing *Cyberpunk 2020* since it was first released. "To us it made sense to adapt something that we enjoy playing," explains Damien Monnier, gameplay designer at CD Projekt RED. "The world of *Cyberpunk* is so gritty, mature and deadly – it really fits the sort of games we make at CD Projekt RED."

"They were asking me questions about stuff and the background history of *Cyberpunk 2020*, which showed they genuinely knew their stuff and were not just slapping a label on it, which is what had happened with one of the larger companies that were talking to us," says Pondsmith. "They have the capability, they have the money, they have the team – and by the money, I mean the money to finish the project – and they have the desire to do the real thing, as opposed to something that just has our name on it."

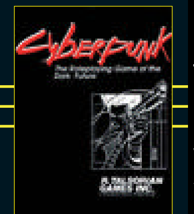
Developing a videogame based on an existing franchise is always a process fraught with peril, especially when it is from a different medium, and even more so when it has a dedicated fan-base as *Cyberpunk* does. "What you aim for, and this is what I really liked when I first talked to the CD Projekt RED guys, was you aim to get the feel first, and then you aim to make your systems wrap around the things that make it feel important," says Pondsmith. "So, y'know for *Cyberpunk*, combat has got to be deadly, there's



The urban metropolis of Night City is endlessly shrouded in darkness and constantly building upon itself.

THE ESSENTIAL CYBERPUNK

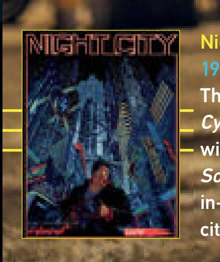
A BREAKDOWN OF THE MAIN VOLUMES IN THE CYBERPUNK SERIES



Cyberpunk 2013
1988
The first edition of *Cyberpunk* was released in 1988. While the system would later be updated, the setting essentially remains unchanged.



Cyberpunk 2020
1990
Two years later, the second and most popular edition of *Cyberpunk* was released. This edition would be revised twice in the next three years, streamlining the rules-system.



Night City Sourcebook
1991
The core setting of *Cyberpunk* was expanded with the *Night City Sourcebook*, giving an in-depth analysis of the city and its people.



"It has a certain quality that is generated by being up at two in the morning, walking out of a closing bar in South of Market, San Francisco, and going 'So what now?'" Mike Pondsmith.

The Night City Police Department's Max-Tac 'Psycho Squad', designed to take down rampaging cyber-psychos by any means necessary.

WHAT IS CYBERPUNK 2020

UNDERSTANDING THE INS AND OUTS OF THE CYBERPUNK UNIVERSE

CORPORATIONS
The world of *Cyberpunk* is dominated by the mega-corporations such as Arasaka and Militech, who manipulate entire governments in their endless pursuit of profit margins.

CYBERWEAR
Cybernetic augmentation of the human body, granting people capabilities beyond the norm, but at a cost to their humanity. What is your soul worth?

MORAL AMBIGUITY
Cyberpunk 2020 is a world of shadows, where life is cheap and choices are coloured in shades of grey. Rarely are there any true heroes and making the ethical choice is not the always the right decision.

LOW LIFE AND HIGH TECH
Despite the high-tech cybernetics and consensual reality of the 'Net, *Cyberpunk* is a game set in the streets, caught in the shadows cast by the bright lights of the corporate towers.

PARANOIA
Trust no one, not your friends, not your lover, and definitely not your employer. Everyone is out for themselves, and the only person you can trust is yourself.

DYSTOPIA
The world of *Cyberpunk* is a world teetering on the edge of technological and sociological collapse, where you survive in the shadow of the Corporations.

CyberGeneration
1993
Technically not part of the *Cyberpunk* canon, *CyberGeneration* is an intriguing 'what-if', blending teen superheroes into the *Cyberpunk* setting.

Firestorm books 1 & 2
1997
These chart the fourth Corporate War, which devastated the planet. A third book was planned, but was later included with *Cyberpunk v.3*.

Cyberpunk v.3
2005
Fifteen years after edition two, Mike Pondsmith released the third edition, also known as *Cyberpunk 203X*, bringing post-cyberpunk to the series.

DECODING THE TRAILER

THE TEASER TRAILER FOR CYBERPUNK 2077 AT FIRST APPEARS TO BE A SIMPLE VIGNETTE; A MOOD-PIECE ACTING AS CD PROJEKT RED'S STATEMENT OF INTENT FOR ITS VIDEOGAME ADAPTION OF CYBERPUNK 2020. HOWEVER, BURIED BENEATH THE SURFACE SHEEN ARE VISUAL CLUES TO A BROADER STORY AND SUBTLE ALLUSIONS TO THE SOURCE MATERIAL

00:00:03

One of the most iconic pieces of artwork from *Cyberpunk 2020* is of the lingerie-clad Alt Cunningham with her cybernetic arm. Here, in the teaser trailer, we find the reimagined Alt Cunningham, with new cybernetic arms, and the beauty we learn is manufactured, as a bullet grazes her cheek, scraping away metal shards.



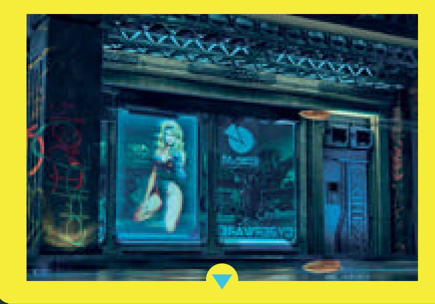
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London based post-rock/electronic band Archive provided *Bullets*, from their seventh studio album *Controlling Crowds I-III*, for the teaser trailer. Music will play a crucial part in *Cyberpunk 2077*, as it will be woven into the fabric of the game, providing atmosphere and building upon the world of Night City, and in this trailer it is no exception.



00:00:43

On billboards shown in the background, we can see the original version of Alt Cunningham. Meanwhile, the advert next to Alt Cunningham promotes cyber-wear from the Dynalar Tech Corporation from *Cyberpunk 2020*.



00:01:10

Slowly taking off is an AV – Aerodyne Vehicle – used by Night City Police Department, which was inspired by *Blade Runner*.



00:01:14

Alt Cunningham's victim lying in the Michael Jackson pose is none other than the teaser video's director, Tomasz Baginski.



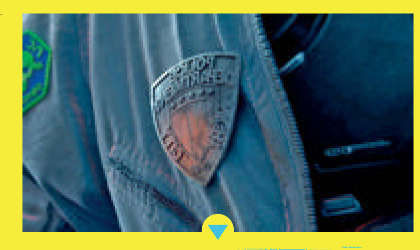
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The news-reel during this scene offers a wealth of information. News 54 is one of the media corporations from *Cyberpunk 2020*. Similarly, Hammerman is also the name of a policeman from the game: whether this is the same Hammerman, a descendant, or someone completely different, we will have to see. Finally, the share price of Arasaka can be seen on the ticker-feed at the bottom of the screen.



00:01:24

A close-up of the badge for Night City Police Department is shown prominently here. At the edges of the scene you can see the unofficial badge of the Max-Tac "Psycho Squad" (who are tasked with taking down cyber-psychos) – a skull with a knife through it.



00:01:26

If we needed proof that CD Projekt RED will remain faithful to the original material, this is it below – the weapon used by the police officer is a Militech Crusher SSG.



00:01:53

As the scene shifts to inside the cruiser, we see the police man exchange a meaningful look with his partner. Closer examination reveals the same bullet scar blemishing her cheek. What does this mean? Perhaps the once-rampaging Alt Cunningham has been rehabilitated and tasked with bringing in cyber-psychos.



00:02:14

The final reveal from CD Projekt RED is in the hidden message buried within the teaser. What does it say? Freeze-frame the teaser video and find out for yourself...





TO KEEP THE FEELING OF CYBERPUNK, YOU KINDA HAVE TO KEEP THINGS BROKEN JUST ENOUGH, AND YOU HAVE TO KEEP THE TECHNOLOGY CURVE DOWN TO WHERE IT'S STILL PEOPLE

MIKE PONDSMITH

The Police in Night City are renowned for shooting first and asking questions later.

gotta be a wide amount of interaction, you gotta have a very modular construction for cyber-wear, you gotta have missions that are really varied and utilise the environment a lot, and above all you have make it feel right – it can't be bright and shiny and sunny, it can't be monochrome, it's gotta have this really specific feel. I always call it the 'wet San Francisco streets at midnight' feeling."

Cyberpunk 2077's announcement was heralded by a teaser video released in early January. Although the video showed no actual gameplay footage, as a statement of intent it was faultless; the video perfectly captured the atmosphere and ethos of cyberpunk. Releasing the trailer so early was a clear message to the fans of *Cyberpunk 2020*, that CD Projekt RED is staying true to the original material.

"The teaser was created to set the tone of the game and to introduce some key elements," says Monnier. "While the Night City police department will be present in the game, characters like the Psychos or Max-Tac special forces, both of which are seen in the teaser, will be more our focus."

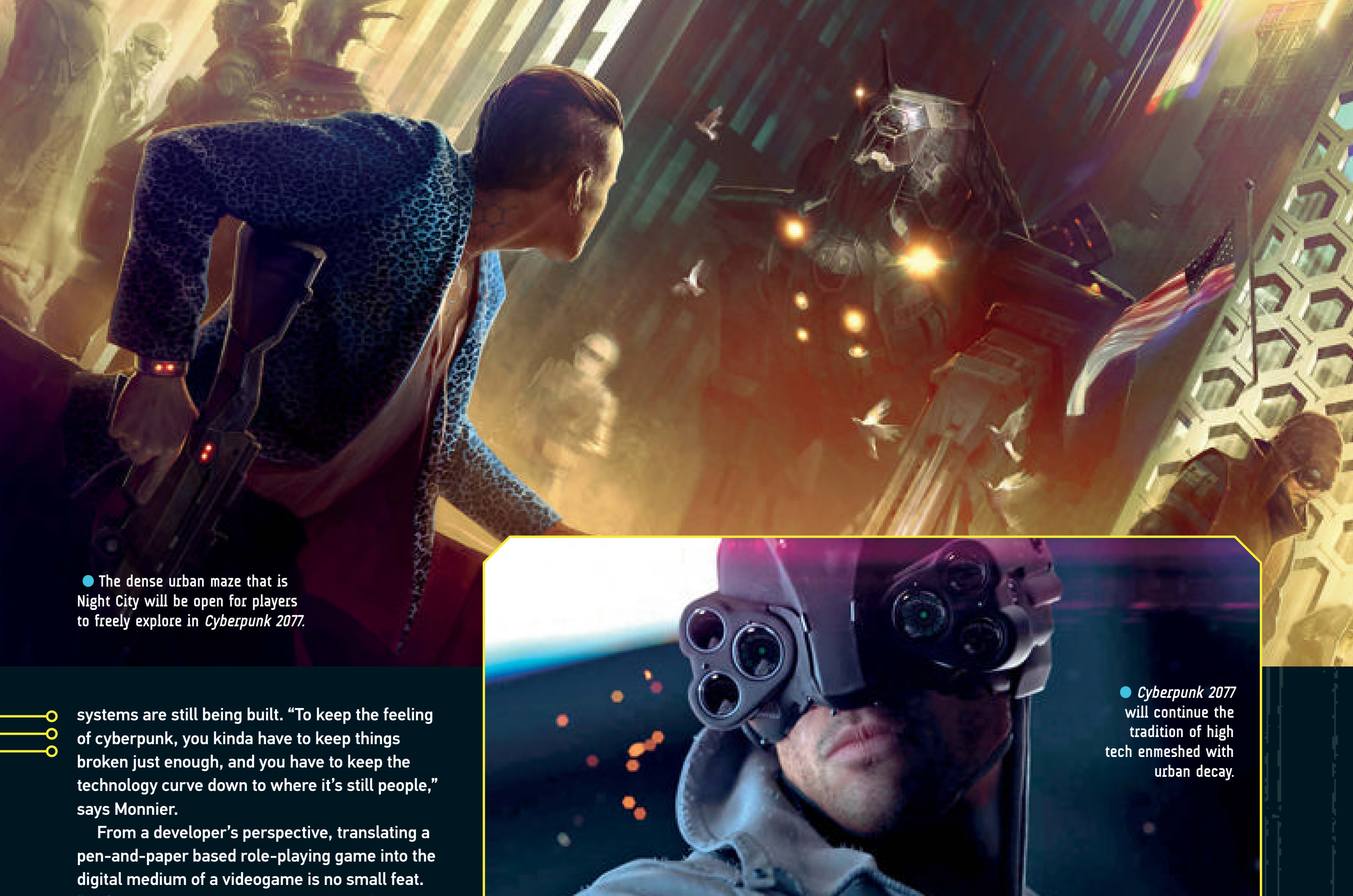
Repeated viewings of the teaser video rewarded viewers by gradually revealing a story of how the Night City Police Department's Max-Tac "Psycho-Squad" might potentially recruit new members. CD Projekt RED demonstrated its appreciation of the source material in the video with an abundance of subtle nods to *Cyberpunk 2020*'s Night City setting. Posters advertising corporations and cyber-wear can be seen in the background, and the badge of Night City's Police Department is prominently worn. "The entire setting for the video, for starters, is a call-out to one of the original frontispieces in Never Fade Away from *Cyberpunk 2013* and they basically did a modern day version of Alt Cunningham," explains Pondsmith. "They then had the actual picture of Alt Cunningham with the cyber-hand in the background, as well as the ads for various corporations and cyberwear."

Mike was particularly pleased with the finished result. "I knew generally what they were doing, as they were showing me sketches of the look of the city that I would sign off," he says laughing, "But there is a big difference between that, and seeing the execution and going: 'Oh yeah, that's it – now you got what's in my head, now you see it, you're seeing what I'm seeing!'"

As with the role-playing game, the setting for *Cyberpunk 2077* is Night City: a dense urban cityscape of festering decay layered with advanced technology, set fifty years after the current *Cyberpunk 2020* timeline. Advancing the existing timeline forward fifty years has created some unique problems. "The biggest battle that we are having in 2077 is that we have to [regress] the technology enough to where we wouldn't find a natural process of technological development where you are walking about with jet packs and flying cars and winged helmets," says Pondsmith, "Luckily for us, we had a Corporate War, that damn near destroyed most of the planet." This Corporate War witnessed the destruction of Chicago and Washington DC, a devastating plague wiping out all life in Hong Kong, and a flood of lethal computer viruses called the "R.A.B.I.D.S." The latter means that going on the 'net is like, according to Pondsmith, "going out into something out of *Road Warrior*." This crippling of the global infrastructure also creates its own complications, as people can no longer communicate with each other via the 'net.

While CD Projekt RED is committed to creating a videogame based upon *Cyberpunk 2020*, its research is not limited to just the series in question. Classic movies, such as *Blade Runner* or *Ghost In The Shell*, are just two of the films referenced by Monnier, two prime examples of the depth that people expect from a cyberpunk setting. Meanwhile, from a videogame perspective, classic titles such as the first *Deus Ex* and *Syndicate*, which captured the essence of cyberpunk, are mentioned as way-markers for the development team.

The repercussions of this Corporate War are still being felt fifty years later in *Cyberpunk 2077*. Vast tracts of the global 'net remain uninhabitable, data records are still being reconstructed and new



The dense urban maze that is Night City will be open for players to freely explore in *Cyberpunk 2077*.

Cyberpunk 2077 will continue the tradition of high tech enmeshed with urban decay.

systems are still being built. "To keep the feeling of cyberpunk, you kinda have to keep things broken just enough, and you have to keep the technology curve down to where it's still people," says Monnier.

From a developer's perspective, translating a pen-and-paper based role-playing game into the digital medium of a videogame is no small feat. "We're working on adapting a number of the pen-and-paper mechanics to a computer game and it's normal that not all of those mechanics will make perfect sense for us," says Monnier. "We do try and keep as many as possible, and stay as close to the original system as we can, whilst adding extra stuff as well. It's a major task to separate what works in one setting from what doesn't, without losing the core *Cyberpunk* experience."

One of the core elements of *Cyberpunk 2020* is Netrunning, where people interface their consciousness with the virtual cyberspace of the global 'net. Within this cyberspace, Netrunners

> IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT TO US TO RELEASE CYBERPUNK 2077 ONLY WHEN IT IS READY, SO WE CAN DO MIKE PONDSMITH'S WORK JUSTICE
> DAMIEN MONNIER, CD PROJEKT RED

could directly interact, for example, with servers, which would appear as data-fortresses. Although being directly connected to the 'net allows for faster response times, this is offset by a greater degree of vulnerability, such as to the lethal ICE (Intruder Countermeasure Electronics). "Netrunning was a massive part of *Cyberpunk 2020*," says Monnier. "We're well aware of that, and although it is too soon to talk about it, I can promise you that we will keep all the things that made Netrunning in *Cyberpunk 2020* awesome."

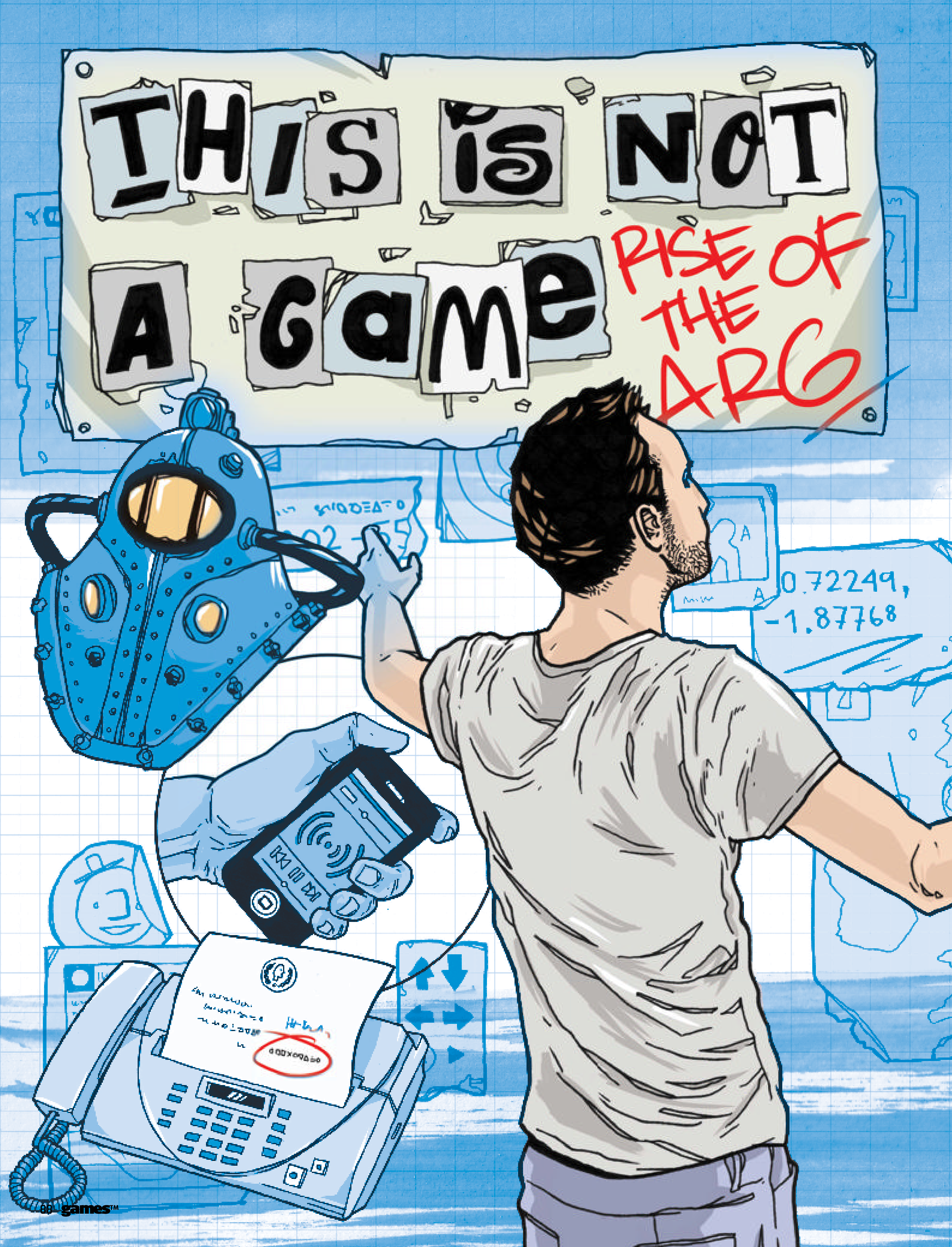
The structure of *Cyberpunk 2077* promises to be a fusion of open-world exploration with a multi-thread non-linear story that will advance the game's narrative. The mature core storyline, recently plotted out during Mike Pondsmith's last trip to CD Projekt RED, focuses on an individual born on the streets. It charts their progress from the gutter and how they survive amongst the booster gangs and mega-corporations.

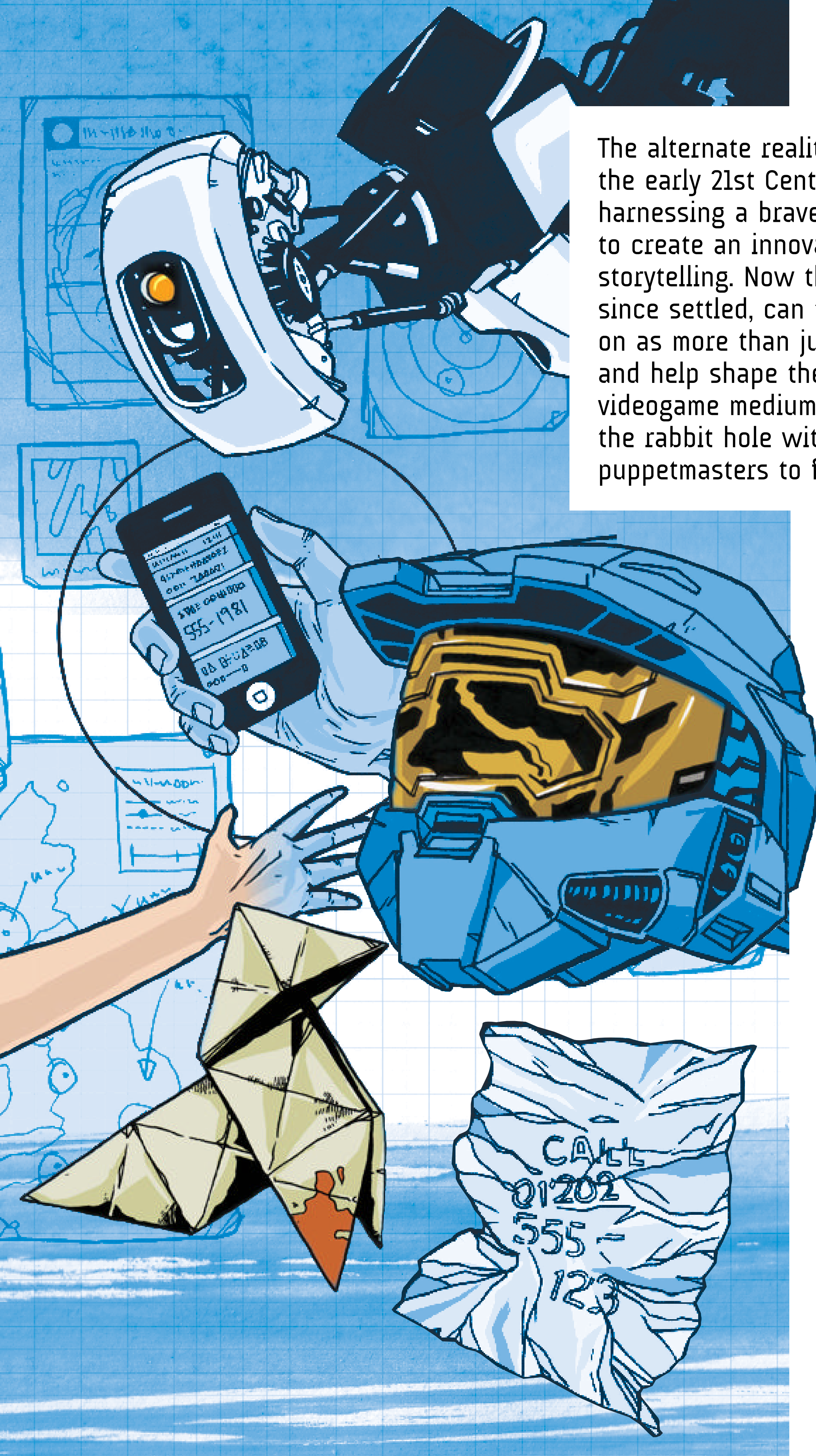
Central to the plot will be the emergent Braindance technology, which allows users to play recordings of other people's lives, experiencing everything from what they see and feel, to their emotions and sensations. These recordings can vary from adventurers pushing themselves to explore beyond the horizon, or of a famous celebrity skiing down a slope in Aspen, to the morbid recordings of a serial killer lusting for a brutal murder, or a booster-gang making an example of shopkeeper for paying their protection money late.

This bleakly mature premise should not be a surprise from the creators of the critically acclaimed *The Witcher* videogames. "Being CD Projekt RED, we have some great writers and quest designers working here; so a good, strong mature narrative is to be expected," explains Monnier. "Another key point for us is the fact that our story will be non-linear. We're working really hard on this, to ensure that you can have a totally different experience from your friends, whilst keeping all these separate experiences equally awesome."

Given the significant degree of open world exploration, allowing the player to freely explore the Night City environs, the long development cycle should be no surprise. "If they didn't have the tools to make it right now," says Pondsmith, "I would be worried with them trying to build it in the near future, as the scope is fairly huge. What I've seen, and what they have already done, for example in *The Witcher 2*, gives me a pretty good handle on whether they can do it or not – and they can do it."

CD Projekt RED has stated that *Cyberpunk 2077* will only be released "when it's ready." At a time when games are often rushed out to meet deadlines, it is gratifying to see this developer cares about the finished product, as Monnier insists is the case. "It's really important to us, not just as developers, but as fans of the original *Cyberpunk*, to release *Cyberpunk 2077* only when it is ready, so we can do Mike Pondsmith's work justice." And as Pondsmith attests, that vision, first conceived between the bar smoke in the early hours, has never been clearer.


THIS IS NOT A GAME
RISE OF THE ARG
0.72249,
-1.87768



The alternate reality game took the early 21st Century by storm, harnessing a brave, new online world to create an innovative strand of storytelling. Now the dust has long since settled, can the ARG still live on as more than just a publicity tool and help shape the future of the videogame medium? We head down the rabbit hole with the original puppetmasters to find out…

If you're looking to attribute the launch of the alternate reality game to any one person, that person is probably Jeanine Salla.

Jeanine wasn't a game designer, or a programmer, or some kind of avant-garde narrative engineer. Jeanine was a sentient machine therapist – or at least, she was listed as such on the trailer credits for Steven Spielberg's anticipated 2001 sci-fi *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*.

If, at the time, viewers had been curious as to what a sentient machine therapist actually *did* on a movie set and had run an internet search on Jeanine's name they would have been taken to a rather unassuming biography at the fictional university where she worked, along with a contact number and an email. Little did players know at the time, but they had just jumped down the rabbit hole, commencing on one of the first ever fully realised ARG experiences.

That seemingly nondescript but peculiar clue hidden just beneath the topsoil pulled players into a swirling cosmos of online narrative, Jeanine's biography unravelling into a story of murder and intrigue across a variety of media. Each new strand of narrative sent the audience to new websites, new clues and new locations, each immersed in a real-time alternate universe of sinister assassinations and anti-robot sentiment.

This game was called '*The Beast*', and it was played by three million people. A new form of entertainment had been born.

But what exactly is an ARG? For the community, that definition is largely rooted in the 'this is not a game' aesthetic. ARGs are games that do not acknowledge that they are games; they pose as alternate realities hidden away in streams of dormant internet code. Their stories exist not in unified narrative, but are spread across phone lines, email addresses, websites and any other forms of media that the puppetmasters – that is, the game's creators – deem to be useful. ARGs exist in real-time as constantly evolving, potentially boundless storytelling experiences.

Yet despite these definitions, there remains no established rule set. "There aren't really rules for ARGs," admits writer and transmedia artist Joseph Matheny. "There's the basic TINAG principle that everybody has to practice, and things like the launch has to be clandestine and the rabbit hole – that is, the first media artefact that draws in players – can't be obvious. But you're not limited to those rules. An ARG can be whatever you want it to be as long as you're building an immersive world for players to embed themselves; to cross the scene and to become an active participant in the story."

Matheny himself was there at the beginning of the ARG, when the increasing prominence of online media got him thinking about new forms of storytelling. "I've been a tech person since the Eighties," he reminisces. "I was an IT expert and moved up into software, and I used to play the Steve Jackson games a lot. I also played the Flying Buffalo play-by-mail games, which were kind of like a LARP but done through mail, phone and faxes. You would send your mailing address and your phone number and you would start getting stuff in the mail.

"I started thinking about the integration of story arc within games and started putting all of these pieces together, and *Ong's Hat* came out of that."

In 1969 college students published articles claiming that clues to the death of The Beatles' Paul McCartney – and his replacement by a lookalike – could be found among the lyrics and artworks of the band's recordings. Elan Lee has cited this 'Paul is dead' phenomenon as an early inspiration for the ARG.

Ong's Hat was more of an experiment in transmedia storytelling than what we would now consider to be an ARG, but its DNA – the concept of telling a story across various platforms and new media – is evident in every alternate reality game that came after.

The project, also known as the *Incunabula Papers*, was a selection of documents posted on The Well, a pioneering internet social site in the late Eighties. Having sat dormant for a decade, the documents provoked a widespread online investigation in the late Nineties, with participants immersed in a fictional story about alternate realities via bulletin board systems, old Xerox mail art networks and early eZines.

With *Ong's Hat*, Matheny took the concept of 'legend tripping' – that is, the act of venturing to areas of some horrific and supernatural event a la *The Blair Witch Project* – and shifted it online. "I set up this mythos, and hid elements of it all over the internet," he remembers. "There were phone numbers that you could call and you would get strange voice mail messages; you might even get a call back from one of the characters. Everybody would come at it from a different angle. It was not a zero-sum game. The whole thing was set up to be an infinite play, so different people would get different things out of its persistence."



The internet has been a creative catalyst for ARG designers and players, bringing millions of people together that previously had no way of interacting with each other.



If you want to see what kicked off the Nineties phenomenon then you can download *Ong's Hat: The Incunabula Papers* in eBook form at incunabula.org/ebooks-2.

> The whole thing was set up to be an infinite play, so different people would get different things out of its persistence. **Joseph Matheny**

This element of the experience, with players reassembling the scattered elements of the story in order to determine exactly what it all meant, would go on to become one of the defining features of the ARG. Rather than present a simple A to B narrative, ARGs present storytelling as a form of archaeology, making the players themselves responsible for discovering and building the chronologically unified narrative.

The ARG has garnered some attention as of late: US intelligence agency IARPA is keen to discover how alternate reality environments can help it develop "high-quality behavioural and psychology research in near-world contexts."

"People who are interested in this kind of experience are interested in working together. It's what the community calls the 'collective detective' scenario," says Matheny. "One of my influences was also the murder mystery theatre things that they used to do… I think that people like that kind of stuff. They like to feel that the story is crossing the proscenium and they're immersed in the story – even to the point of *being* a character in the story. I think that's the hook with ARGs."

However, it wasn't until the start of the new millennium that Xbox game designer Elan Lee and Microsoft creative director Jordan Weisman would create a similar experience, inspired by a moment of desperation.

Hired to create a game of the movie *A.I.* in 2001, the two were faced with a problem. "We went to a screening and my heart just sunk," laments Lee.

"There's this robotic child who wants more than anything to get his mother's love and to become a real boy, but by the end he's watched not only her die but also all of civilisation crumble. No one walks away from that thinking, 'Wow! I really want to play the racing game of that!'"

Lee and Weisman had all the narrative, characters and a world to tie their game together, but lacked a solid idea with which to make an engaging experience out of it. "We had all the 'glue' but didn't know how to release it," says Lee. "I was sitting at lunch with Jordan trying to work it out, when at that moment his phone rang and he said, 'Wouldn't it be cool if this was the game calling me right now?' That's where everything started."

Over the coming months, Lee and Weisman built what is now widely considered to be the first 'alternate reality game' – a murder mystery set in the world of AI instigated by one Jeanine Salla. "It spanned hundreds of thousands of websites, phone numbers, emails, fax machines, physical locations…" remembers Lee. "It took place in the real world, day by day, as if it were alive. However, we grossly underestimated what it would take to build a game like that," he admits.

"We released the first six months of content, and in 24 hours the players had worked through all of it. That was the scariest evening of my life because we realised, 'Hey, tomorrow we have nothing. Literally nothing.' At that point the nature of game design changed for me."

Much as Matheny used the Agile software development principle when designing *Ong's Hat*, Lee too had to find a more flexible way of telling stories. "I was used to building console games where you could make a straightforward narrative," says Lee. "In a console game when you walk too far you will hit a mountain or an invisible wall. You simply can't walk farther than that; you understand that those are the constraints. But in a game like *The Beast* or any ARG you can crawl off the edge of the map."

It's an interesting reversal of problems. Adaptive narrative is something that videogames have long sought to achieve, but even the best examples such as *Heavy Rain* have failed to realise the concept in a truly

THE EXTENDED WORLD

The Beast created a marketing craze that's been harnessed by many entertainment launches over the years. Here are some of the biggest.



Nine Inch Nails – Year Zero

■ NINE INCH NAILS' Trent Reznor never intended for *Year Zero* to be just an album – it was a project that encompassed an entire alternate future reality where a Christian fundamentalist state had dissolved civil rights and a mysterious being named The Presence was threatening to end the world. The rabbit hole in this case was a code hidden on the back of a NIN tour T-shirt, but clues also came in the case of a USB flash drive found in a Portuguese bathroom stall and images hidden in the spectrogram versions of songs. A secret NIN gig attended by players was even shut down mid-way by a SWAT team.



Halo 2 – I Love Bees

■ *I LOVE BEES* WAS something of an odd campaign, in that Microsoft chose to build hype for its sci-fi space marine shooter using a website for bee-keeping enthusiasts. The twist? The hacking of the website was the result of a rogue AI named Melissa who was slowly being overtaken by the Covenant. Players were repeatedly sent GPS coordinates to payphones all around the country that would ring and offer new clues as to the advancement of the story – or even conversations with the AI itself.



Cloverfield – Slusho

■ JJ ABRAMS LOVES to generate an atmosphere of mystery around his projects and *Cloverfield* was no different. The viral marketing campaign that unfolded around the initial enigmatic shakycam footage was rather obscure, involving the Japanese slushy brand 'Slusho!' and a company named Tagruato. Yet players who stuck with the ARG eventually learned a great deal about a deep-sea drilling mishap as well as clues that suggested the Slusho company was responsible for the creature's appearance.



The Dark Knight – Why So Serious?

■ ONE OF THE most extensive ARGs ever made, the *Why So Serious?* campaign bridged the gap between *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*. It kicked off when people found $1 bills with Joker-style graffiti on them at Comic-Con, each of which led to a page advertising for jobs for Joker henchmen. From this the ARG led to phone numbers *written in the sky*, cakes that had cell phones stuffed inside them, and players deciding to be a Joker henchman, work for Lieutenant Gordon, or join Harvey Dent's campaign.

convincing manner. ARGs suffer from the opposite – the puppetmasters can't simple prod their players through a pre-defined experience because they have the ability to go "off map" at any given moment, investigating clues and characters that may not have been deemed as integral to the central narrative strand.

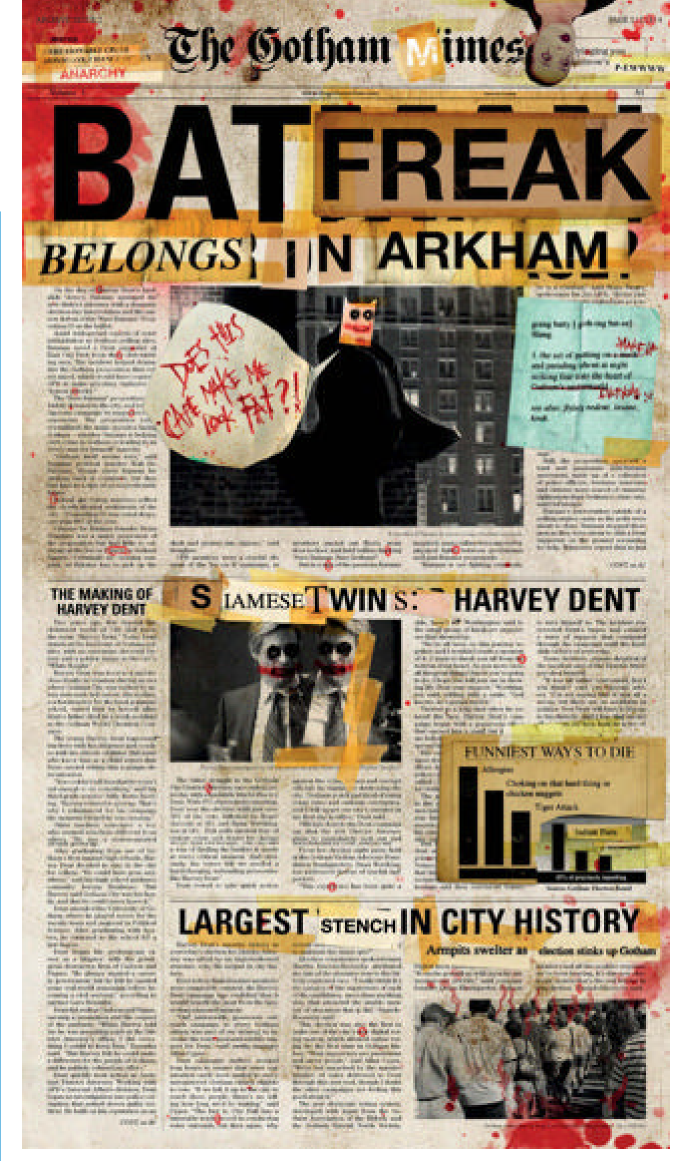
According to Lee, for an ARG to be successful, the puppetmasters must adapt and alter the story in response to player action, even going as far as to leave 'white space' for the players to fill in themselves. "*The Beast* became live dinner theatre," he tells us. "It was improv. Tap dancing. Every single day. With any ARG the players who are on the other end of that dance partnership either follow that lead or they go off somewhere else, and the puppetmasters have to react to that. The community you're interacting with have brains of their own. They have to offer the content as much as you do.

"The most powerful games are the ones that acknowledge that and reward both sides of the creation process. Sometimes the players challenge you to create a world that far surpasses anything that you thought you could create, and those are the most beautiful moments."

The man in charge of creating these moments was Sean Stewart, a respected sci-fi scribe hired on a recommendation from the Spielberg camp. "Jordan [Weisman] called me up and after about fifteen minutes asked me, 'By any chance do you know what a role-playing game is?' And I said, 'Well if you're looking for a guy who's played *Empires Of The Petal Throne* with the *Rune Quest* damage tables, that would be me.' That turned out to be my secret Masonic handshake."

Stewart's pencil and paper RPG experience proved pivotal in his ability to generate story ideas on the fly. "An ARG is like playing an RPG with two million of your closest friends. It's a narrative that you need to control, but you also have to be responsive to what the audience is doing without breaking the shape of the story that you started with."

For instance: one website in *The Beast*'s canon posed as a secret hacker page, on which a puppetmaster programmer had included a Russian accent barking, 'Hacked by the Red King!'



■ There are several basic design principles that make up the ARG, including storytelling as archaeology; platformless narrative; using real life as a medium; collaborative storytelling; and the 'this is not a game' aesthetic.

> "Honestly, every time someone says, 'Hey this character on this TV show has a blog!' that's our grandchild" **Sean Stewart**

"We never wrote that – the web dev just thought it sounded cool and 'hacker-y'," says Stewart. "The audience got crazy excited about him though! They thought he was so important, while we we're all sat there thinking, 'Who the hell is this guy?' [laughs]. For the next update I wrote a hell of a lot of back story about the Red King. He ended up becoming one of the main characters of the whole show, and all because a random web developer had thrown in this sound loop.

"In a sense, any kind of serial drama is like this," he continues. "You get a chance to see what the audience is interested in. Charles Dickens publishing books by chapter in the London newspapers meant he had a chance to see what people were responding to and what they weren't while keeping his overall structure together. When you hit upon a concept or plot line that people are interested in, run that out a little. When you try something no one cares about, wrap that up and move on. I think if you're willing and you enjoy that dance, that collaborative work with your audience, it's quite exhilarating."

> In ARGs, a whisper is considered louder than a shout, meaning rather than push players to the experience through open promotion it must *pull* them towards it with elements of secrecy.

Videogames are far from being at a point where they can be this reactive – they must always adhere to the code implanted before they leave the development studio, funnelling players along predefined narratives that offer only the illusion of choice. However, that's not to say that developers have never attempted to intertwine some of the ARG methodology into their experiences.

For example, Lexis Numérique's 2003 title *In Memoriam* saw players receive emails from other in-game characters and find clues on the internet from both real and specially created websites. Less embedded into the actual videogame experience but still built around it are the 2009 *BioShock 2* ARG *Something In The Sea*, which saw players immerse themselves in character Mark Meltzer's quest to find his missing daughter, and the Morse code and SSTV encoded images that pre-empted the release of *Portal 2*.

In the future, however, Lee expects to see a great deal more videogames incorporate the concept of ARGs on a far deeper and more meaningful level. "Games have this problem, in that it's very hard to tell a story where a character has the ability to break the pacing, because in doing so they're breaking the story," he tells us. "ARGs on the other hand are actually quite good at telling stories. You're still controlling a character, but the character is *you*. It's where you want to look. It's the interactions you have with the community.

"But that said, ARGs aren't nearly as exciting as saying, 'I got to shoot thirty terrorists today'," he admits. "So I think that videogames right now are striving to move closer to ARGs because they want to feel more real and ARGs are striving to move closer to traditional games because they want to be more exciting.

"Ultimately we're going to meet somewhere in the middle and define a new form of entertainment that will be custom built for the 21st Century: games that follow you around after you turn off the console. Games that call you and allow you to have

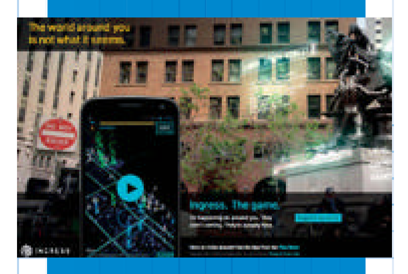
AUGMENTED REALITY GAME

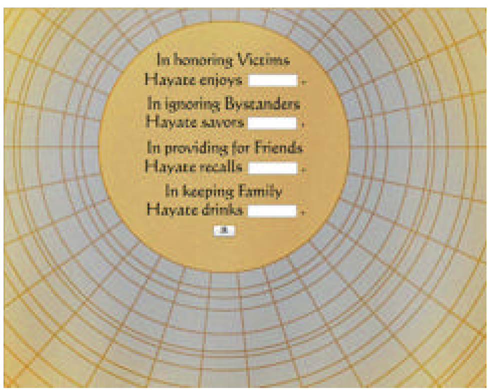
■ IF THERE'S ANY one element of contemporary technology that our interviewees agree presents an important next step for ARGs, it's that of augmented reality. Some titles are already adopting features of both the augmented and alternate reality experience, such as GPS treasure-hunting game *Geocaching* and the glossier *Ingress*. Currently in closed beta, NianticLabs@Google's *Ingress* is a massively multiplayer online game played on Android devices, with players joining one of two warring factions in order to find sources of a mysterious energy known as "exotic matter" out in real world locations.

The experience shares several elements with that of the ARG – in fact, it even begins with a message stating, "You have downloaded what you believe to be a game, but it is not."

Ingress pushes players out into the outside world, tracking down XM portals on the streets and roads around their home, and simply by choosing to side with the 'Enlighted' or 'Resistance' they become characters in the story, aligning themselves with a collective userbase in order to achieve a common goal. All of these features contain the DNA of alternate reality gaming – even the game's website – www.nianticproject.com – presents itself as an online investigation board where cryptic clues are posted. When solved, they grant bonus XM to lucky players.

With its levelling up and item collection, *Ingress* is more RPG than ARG, but the elements that take players out of the house and looking up from the screen are certainly the consequence of ARG design.





■ During *The Beast*, a piece of stock was mistakenly used for two different characters. Stewart wrote an entire sub plot to cover up this mistake, which ended up being "one of the more haunting and ultimately sad moments in the entire experience."

■ All of the ARG designers we spoke to agreed on one thing – if there's a future for the ARG, it's going to be found in the mobile market.



conversations with the characters when you're not in front of the television. Games that allow you to continue being that character when you're not still holding the pad doing missions. I think that we could see traditional videogames punctuated with real life interactions that make you feel closer to the fiction, and more like you're actually embodying that character."

Such talk might sound like perfect ammunition for videogame critics who already consider the pastime to be a dangerous descent into escapist fantasy, but it's an intriguing concept nonetheless. Imagine games that, like ARGs, use real life as the medium: Liara T'Soni emailing you with a request to find information embedded in an encrypted website, or a member of Purity First 'hacking' your mobile phone and leading you towards an important real life narrative event.

Indeed, this line of thought could very well be exactly what Bungie has planned for *Destiny*, the upcoming open world shooter. Rather than simply getting high score updates or messages from friends, perhaps the new sci-fi game could be reaching out to players in a far more consequential manner.

Matheny is in agreement that platform-agnostic narrative is the next big step: "We went through this period where ARGs were used as commercial marketing for movies and games like *I Love Bees* (see *The Extended World*)," he says somewhat despondently. "I'm not knocking those at all, but what Hollywood saw as the basic elements of usability of ARGs disappointed me, because I always thought that the medium is actually a new form of storytelling. Now that Hollywood interest is waning a bit, I'm hoping that we can back up and come back at it as an extensive literary method that's a new way of telling stories across platforms.

"Now we have things like augmented reality – nobody has really looked at that as a storytelling platform! You could have people come into an area and throw up a phone and use an augmented reality application and see graffiti on the walls, or objects left by characters.

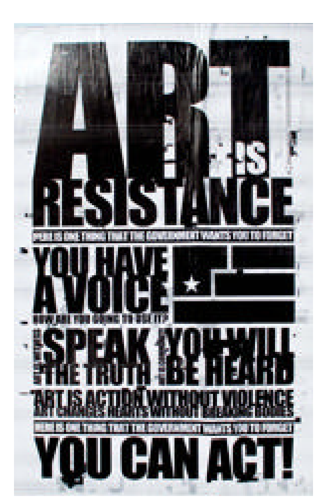
Trent Reznor has gone on record with his distaste of the marketing side of the ARG. For him, the ARG format was part of the 'art form' surrounding *Year Zero*.

You could have people walking around all kinds of places looking for clues. I honestly think that we need to remember the world and to need to incorporate it as part of the playboard. New technology means you extend that board once again."

Stewart is similarly convinced that, in one form or another, the ARG is here to stay. "It's difficult to do exactly the things that we were doing. It's just expensive," he says. "However, that instinct to stop worrying so much about only one medium or only one platform and just let the story *world* be the thing; that's an enduring set of tools and techniques.

"That instinct to continuously build story worlds that people dive into and share is going to become the defining art space for the coming years," concludes Stewart.

"Just like the invention of the motion picture camera created the storytelling technology that defined the 20th century, I think the evolution of the computer and all the things that go with it will define the storytelling platform of the 21st Century. It will have all those qualities of being shareable, multi-platform and exploratory. That genie's not going back in the bottle."



■ "The experience of working with NIN was wonderful," says Stewart on writing the *Year Zero* project. "While a lot of musicians spend a lot of time scoring movies, I'm one of the few writers who got to score an album!"

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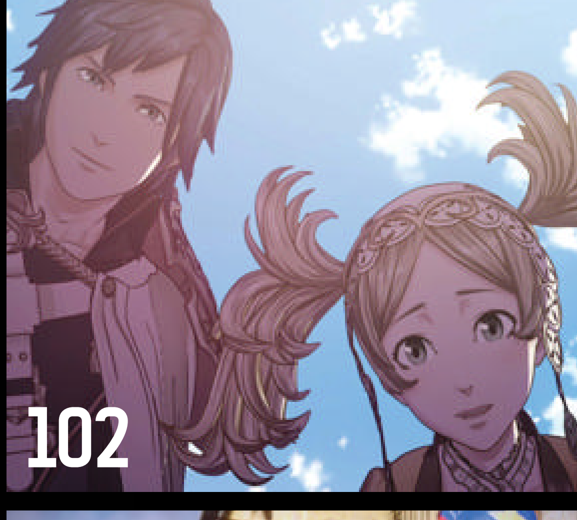
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Metro Last Light

DIGGING INTO 4A GAMES' INTENSELY ATMOSPHERIC FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

THE AVERAGE

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LAST LIGHT'S APPROACH TO SURVIVALIST MENTALITY IS SUPERFICIAL AT BEST – A COLLECTION OF INTERESTING TOOLS THAT LOOKS GREAT BUT ADDS LITTLE





FURTHER READING: DEEPER UNDERGROUND | FEATURE | ISSUE 128 | PAGE 42

UNDERGROUND, OVERGROUND, WANDERING FREE

Metro: Last Light

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Ukraine
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: 4A Games
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 17 May
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, 2.2+ GHz Dual Core CPU, 2GB RAM, DirectX 9, GeForce 8800/GeForce GTS 250
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



There's a sense of familiarity that echoes through the haunted subway stations of *Metro 2033* and into the derelict subterranean tunnels of *Metro: Last Light.* It's somewhat needless to say that *Half-Life* was a key inspiration for 4A Games when it came to crafting the world of the original *Metro 2033*, establishing – as Valve so triumphantly did with the alien-infested landscape of Black Mesa – a credible universe, while deftly navigating along the tightrope of narrative and gameplay to tremendous success. It's no surprise then that the Ukrainian studio's eye hasn't wandered too far from Gordon Freeman's extra-terrestrial exploits when crafting its sequel, and to the developer's credit it manages to both restore and improve upon that story-action balance without compromising either of the core tenets.

That's partly due to 4A Games' decision to shuck Dmitry Glukhovsky's published literary sequel in favour of its own unique canon, continuing from the more catastrophic of the two possible endings at the climax of *Metro 2033* that returns the player to the perspective of the original's taciturn protagonist Artyom. Psychologically scarred from the evisceration of the Dark Ones, Artyom's journey is one of atonement; the pursuit of internal salvation, while igniting a flicker of hope for the remnants of humanity. Is it possible for one of the Dark Ones to have survived the fatal blast? The question alone is reason enough to drive Artyom back to Moscow's charred surface and drag players into the dread-filled depths of the metro system. And it's the world itself that continues to be *Metro*'s greatest strength.

It's a backdrop that quite simply allows the player to indulges fervent curiosity at one moment, but isn't afraid to snap players hastily past its wonders minutes later. A more established studio and a bloated budget might have enabled *Last Light*'s dour setting to swell, and it's true testament to the modest

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

KNIFE TIME: The knife used for stealth in *Metro 2033* couldn't cut card, so luckily the pointy end of Artyom's personal throat cutter can take a man down in one swift move.

Left: The game's most bombastic action sequences take place in the last third of the *Metro: Last Light*. It doesn't quite have the muscle to supply a great showstopper, but 4A Games delivers enough bang for your buck where it counts.

Left: The visuals surpass those of the original. The lighting in particular is incredibly impressive, adding to the hopelessness of the world and the possibility that around every corner some nightmarish image might jump into view.

TIME TO DIE

One of the notable revisions in the sequel is the wristwatch worn by Artyom. *Metro 2033* featured an overly fussy timer required players to squint to see any of the details, but his latest piece of arm furniture is a more practical piece of kit. The Nixie tube watch contains a timer that counts down the remaining minutes left on the air filter, while a small blue light indicates when Artyom is visible to enemies. It's more discernible on the screen as well, not requiring players to press a button to gain a closer look. It's one area of the sequel's revamped design that doesn't compromise the established mechanics of the original game.

developer's strength that it layers an astounding level of detail across each district of this engaging setting.

Stations filled with refugees demand that players linger and soak up the atmosphere; eavesdropping on idle prattle further peels back layers of local history and illuminates on the wider conflict between the three warring factions at the heart of the story. 4A understands moments where a considered pace is needed as well as it appreciates the need to inject some histrionics into a protracted shootout. There's much to see here, even if interaction has been downplayed since the original. One of the apposite ingenuities of the original *Metro* was the number of mechanics that mirrored the challenges faced by the survivors stuck within the savage landscape.

In *Last Light* a number of those features have been noticeably stripped back. The most evident of which is the gas mask – essential for surviving outside in the wilderness and the source of much frustration in the original – here reduced to near redundancy thanks to the surplus supply of air filters littered around the environment. What was once a barrier from enjoyment due to the scarcity of extra filters (and, admittedly, poor checkpointing) has almost lost its purpose; without the constant threat of respiratory collapse it fails to amplify the anxiety that permeates much of this shooter.

Indeed, much of *Metro: Last Light* lacks the depth of the first entry, ultimately undercutting the challenge that players faced in the original. For instance, the monetary system – based on military grade ammunition – is of little concern for the majority of the game, as ammo and weapons are easy enough to discover. Not once during our playthrough did we have to resort to blowing our cash and using currency as a replacement for our spent bullets. *Last Light*'s approach to survivalist mentality is superficial at best – a collection of interesting tools that looks great but adds little.

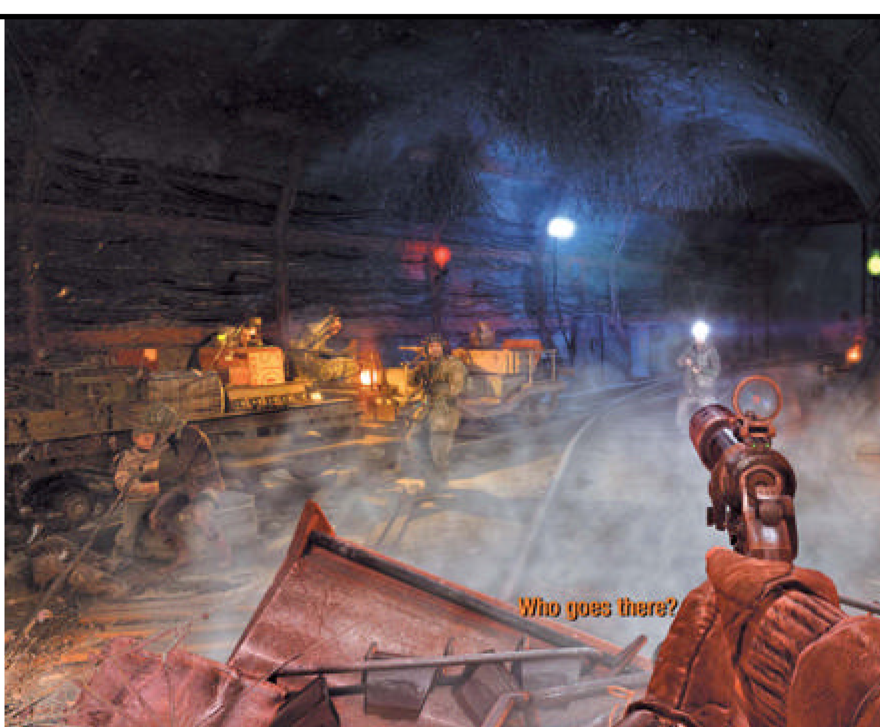
It's a shame, given the investment to the detail evident across the rest of the world. But *Last Light* does supply a palliative: the action. Much improved on its forebear, gunplay has been considerably tightened, lending a hefty punch to firefights and producing an evocative sheen to high-octane scenarios, feeling every bit the triple-A behemoth it aspires to be. Fundamentally, *Last Light* is a corridor shooter but it rarely feels as such. Shootouts are divided by long stretches of tunnel walking, heightening the impact when the proverbial brown stuff hits the fan. Environments are tight but immaculately constructed to belie their restrictiveness, always allowing the action to organically develop. This works to the favour of stealth, another aspect that has been significantly bolstered in functionality, making it a much more feasible alternative to traditional pop-and-shot altercations. The addition of covert knife attacks alone makes it relatively easy to pass through whole stages without troubling any alarms. Unscrew a couple of light bulbs and you can casually stride inches behind an enemy without raising suspicion. But, while the length gone to making furtive play much more accessible is commendable, the AI lacks the necessary reactionary smarts to make taking this approach solely a fulfilling venture.

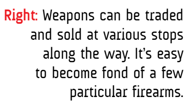
FAQs

Q. DOES IT CONTINUE FROM THE BAD ENDING?
Yes it does. All the Dark Ones are dead under after all that nuclear fire and poor Artyom is still recovering from his mistake.

Q. ARE GAS MASKS STILL ASS?
Not at all. 4A has reduced their importance massively, meaning you'll barely be short of air filters on your travels.

Q. DOES IT FOLLOW THE SECOND BOOK?
God no. Have you read that thing? *Last Light* takes place not long after the events of the original and creates its own unique canon.




Right: Weapons can be traded and sold at various stops along the way. It's easy to become fond of a few particular firearms.



Above: A few of the mutants on the surface will protect their vulnerable areas. Maintaining a distance is sometimes the most effective approach.

Right: *The Dark Knight Rises* doesn't quite have the same impact when told through shadow puppets.

MUCH IMPROVED ON ITS FOREBEAR, GUNPLAY HAS BEEN CONSIDERABLY TIGHTENED, LENDING A HEFTY PUNCH TO FIREFIGHTS

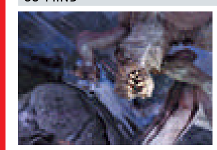
Below: *Metro: Last Light* puts further emphasis on the relationships that Artyom makes through his time in the post-apocalyptic Moscow. These alliances play an integral role throughout the main narrative, constantly asking players to question their allegiances.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

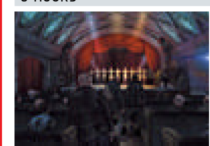
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

60 MINS



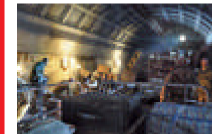
You start shooting a winged demon that picks you up and drops you in a river of toxic sludge. It takes a further two hours for us to realise it can't be killed. Well played, 4A.

5 HOURS



Things start to jiggle a lot and it all gets rather awkward when you accidently accept a terrible lap dance that you can't exit until it's finished. Use this time to plan out tactics.

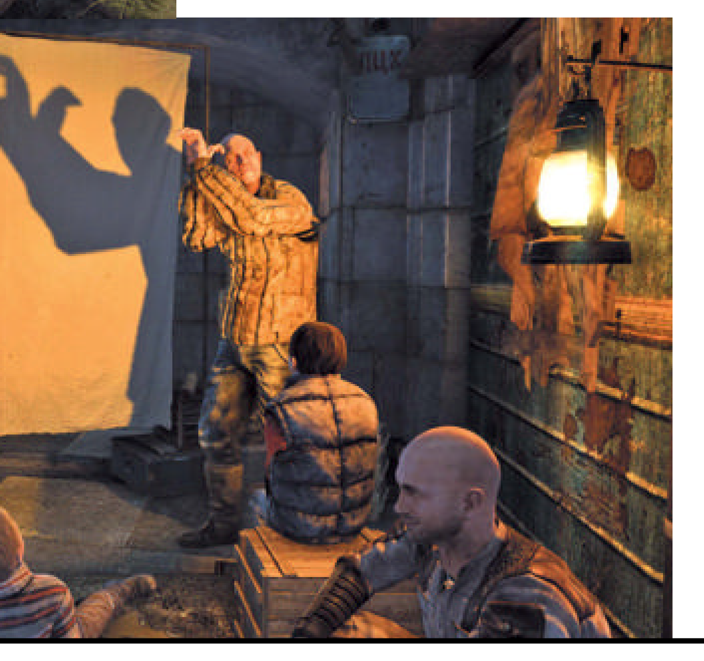
10 HOURS



The game reaches its conclusion and you can't quite make sense of it all. Not because it's particularly opaque, it's just a bit sloppy. A real shame, considering how much of this we did like.

NEXT STOP: HOME

Many of the stations featured in *Metro 2033* were fairly indistinguishable from one another. One of the greatest strengths of the sequel is how individual each new stop on the underground map feels. Distinct locales, factions and trades populate different districts, while one in particular location features a cabaret performance players can sit and enjoy for the duration. It's not only an impressive amount of detail, but it sets the stage for the game's ultimate confrontation. Some of *Last Light*'s strongest moments involve wandering around these small pockets of humanity and just drinking in the setting, listening to stories and interacting with citizens.



4A is clearly more comfortable beneath the soil than above, with sequences set under the grey-tinged sky and among the rubble of Moscow often lacking in urgency compared to below ground. It's here that the game tries to inflate its ambitions, making a few daring design decisions that risk hurting its structure. On the few occasions that locations on the surface expand slightly, navigation feels muddled, enemies erratic and you can't help but feel it's something of a missed opportunity. We're accustomed to sequels that push the envelope and elevate scope beyond the original's achievements. Yet, *Last Light* is a ruthlessly consistent beast, one that feels neglectful of the inherent creativity that sequels so munificently reward. Your selection of firearms is lamentably pedestrian, moral decisions amount to nothing and the final stretch of the campaign fizzles out anticlimactically.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SIGHTSEEING: While 4A endeavours to expand outdoor environments slightly throughout the game, *Last Light* feels like it could have enhanced the exploration elements.

Despite this, it still has the capacity to surprise. *Metro 2033* was a gorgeous-looking experience and in that regard *Last Light* exceeds expectations. The sheer level of infinitesimal graphical detail across the world is startling, from the rust specks resting on gun barrels to the snarling faces of its beastly denizens. There's rarely a moment that doesn't feature some standout visual element. 4A's engine lights the twisting channels of the metro in such a way to constantly instil a sense of terror, amplifying the nerve-plucking tension of exploration. However, the story falters slightly in providing the same compelling punch as *Metro 2033* – and ultimately, key details can easily be missed during the pacier final act – but 4A's dedication to the world it has created is rare among the genre.

4A Games wears its influences on its sleeve, creating a first-person shooter of robust standard. Yet it gives little consideration to progression – in both terms of furthering either the genre or its own formula. Many of the mechanics that have survived the original game return stripped back in a misguided attempt to placate complexity criticisms, rather than exploring methods that retain strategy and heighten the overall immersion.

It is a world that leaves you wanting more, which is as much a compliment as it is a regret. However, it succeeds for much the same reason the original remains such a leftfield pleasure, while a few notable improvements to the core tenets make it a much more enjoyable experience overall. No, it doesn't quite reach the lofty standards set by its influences. No, it won't be troubling Gordon Freeman anytime soon. It might not be *Half-Life*, but *Metro: Last Light* is far from half bad.



VERDICT 8/10

AN IMMERSIVE AND COMPELLING EXPERIENCE

NINTENDO'S UNSUNG STRATEGY SERIES RETURNS WITH A SLEEPER CLASSIC IN THE MAKING

Fire Emblem: Awakening*

The modern trend towards easier, more accessible games was always likely to prompt a backlash, and so a raft of recent titles has endeavoured to remind us just how much videogame death matters. In the likes of *Dark Souls* and *ZombiU*, dying isn't merely a minor pothole in an otherwise flawlessly surfaced road to the finish, but a matter of great significance, carrying tangible narrative and mechanical weight. Of course, *Fire Emblem*'s been quietly pulling a similar trick for years now: if a character suffers a fatal injury on the battlefield they're gone forever. Intelligent Systems doesn't always kill them all off – a character might hobble away from the frontline to lick their wounds – but either way they'll never fight by your side again. *Awakening* ups the stakes by really making you care about its cast: a battle isn't simply about winning but emerging victorious with everyone still alive. Leave no man, woman or shape-shifting rabbit-person behind.

Here, it's the quality of the writing that really drives that message home, an expert localisation fleshing out a terrific bit of swords-and-spells fantasy. Its story is familiar but compelling: a little episodic in places, but with a solid arc that sees you attempting to unite a kingdom against the imminent arrival of a seemingly unstoppable evil. More importantly, it's populated by a large cast of characters who, even when they're transforming into dragons mid-battle, are grounded by recognisably human traits. Unusually, while your chosen avatar plays a pivotal role in the plot, they're not the de facto hero. That responsibility falls to the ceaselessly stoic Chrom, though the bonds you forge with him and his band of warriors are not only crucial from a story standpoint, but are deeply knotted into *Awakening*'s systems.

Ostensibly, little has changed. You still compete on grid-based battlefields, engaging in turn-based tactical battles that are intertwined with traditional role-playing tropes of levelling and classes. As ever, axes beat lances beat swords beat axes, while flying steeds offer range and power while facing grave danger from magic and bow users. But a new idea transforms it utterly: here you can pair up with allies for significant bonuses. Place two units in the same square and one will offer the other support in battle. Any unit under attack stands a greater chance of avoiding incoming blows or increasing their hit rate with a friend by their side. Further benefits are offered when a relationship blossoms: a successful pairing will engage in support conversations outside battle that directly impact combat. Comrades will sometimes strike a second blow after the first has landed, though this is nothing compared to the heartstopping moment when you leave a Pegasus Knight within range of an enemy archer, and a Cavalier nobly leaps forward to deflect the potentially deadly arrow to safety. Accidents can and will happen – you might, for example, take a calculated risk against an enemy with a low hit rate who ends up catching you with a lucky shot – which encourages cautious, methodical play. Not just as you might well grow

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Intelligent Systems
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

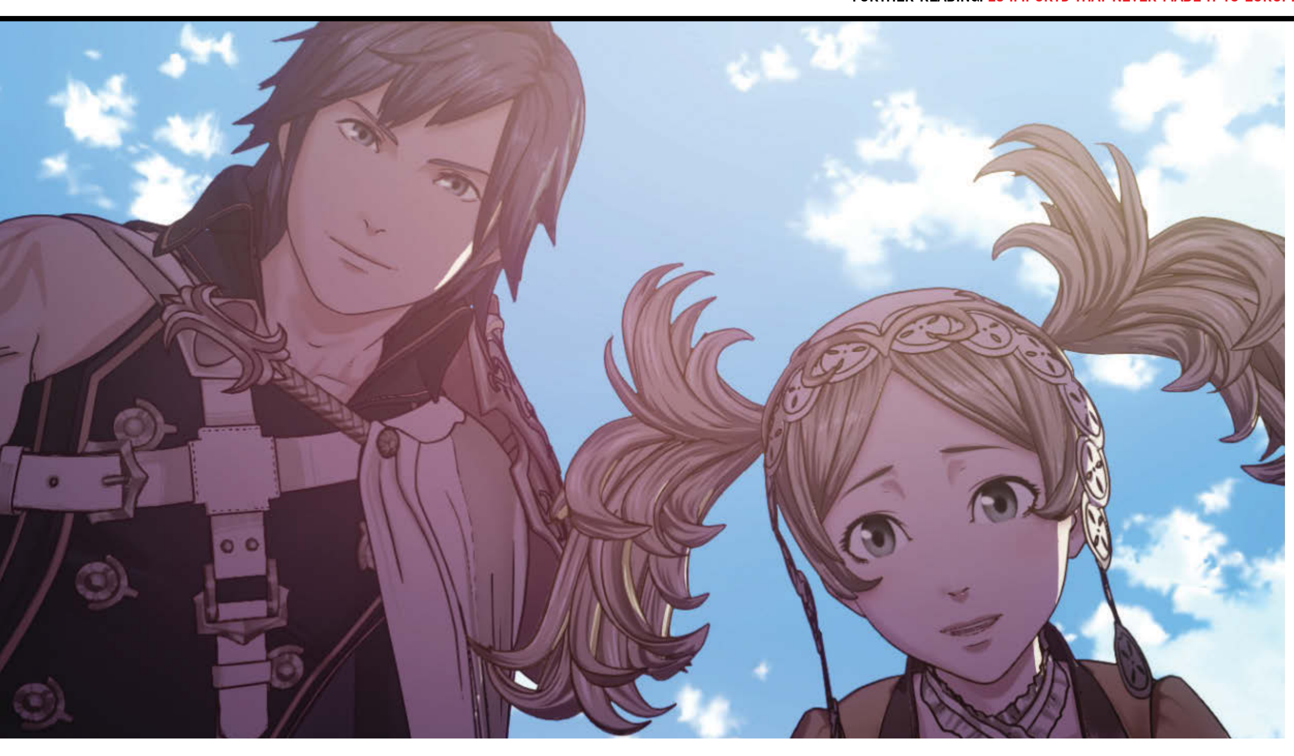


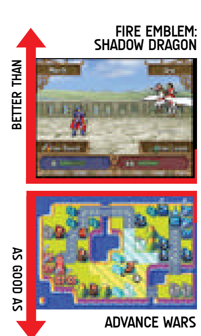
Above: Visit your barracks and you can eavesdrop on conversations that may give you stat or relationship boosts. A neat touch sees the bare room fill up with books, weapons, banners and other detritus as you progress.



Above: An auto-battle option is a thoughtful addition for when you have the upper hand in battle and just want to finish off the enemy stragglers, but you shouldn't rely on it unless you're absolutely certain of winning.

FIRE EMBLEM: AWAKENING IS AS GOOD AS ANYTHING NINTENDO HAS PRODUCED IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS





FAQs

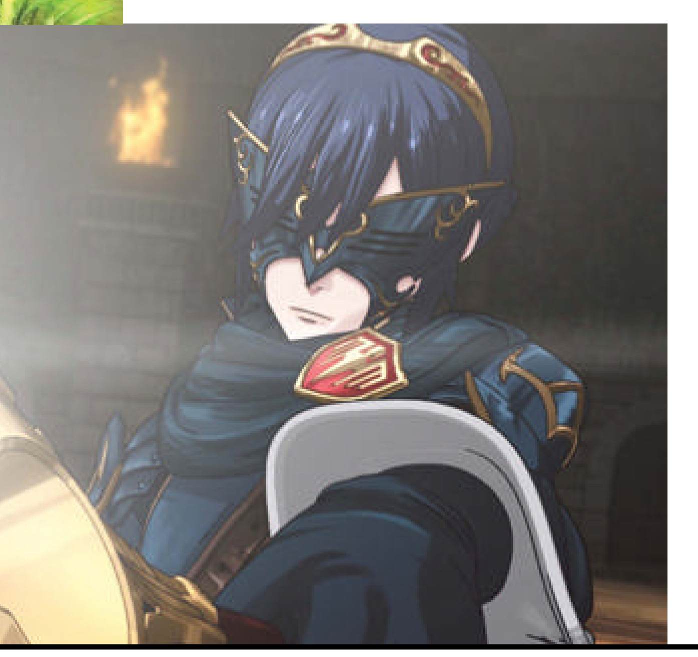
Q. HOW LONG?
You could reach the end within 20 hours if you were rushing. But you won't want to.

Q. WEAK BECOME HEROES?
The seemingly feeble villager Donnel and dancer Olivia are well worth persevering with.

Q. LINKS TO THE PAST?
Characters from previous *FE* titles appear on the map. Beat their army and you can recruit them to yours.

FAMILY TIES

A time-travelling conceit – which, in truth, is never really fully explained – adds extra significance to the emotional bonds you make. Should a male and female character forge an S-rank relationship then they'll bear children who travel back from the future to fight alongside mum and dad. This in turn leads to some interesting conversations as the parents grapple with their offspring being of similar age. Evidently, Intelligent Systems clearly doesn't subscribe to Philip Larkin's notion of parentage: while some carry similar neuroses, the kids benefit from the bonus abilities of both parents. As such, they're worth developing further, becoming some of the most powerful characters in the later game. They're among the most charismatic units, too: we particularly enjoyed the cocksure Inigo and klutzy Cynthia.



fond of the characters and their interstitial dialogues (which range from the amusing to the genuinely touching) but because that unit represents one less ally to choose from. As a SOP to newcomers, there's an option to play with permadeath turned off, but this should be ignored: it lightens the emotional load of the choices and sacrifices you make, and *Awakening* is a lesser experience for it.

Elsewhere, *Awakening* scores highest over past entries in the quality of its presentation. You won't want to turn the combat animations off, such is the visual force of each skirmish, while the potential for unpredictability makes it all the more absorbing: the pre-battle screen might give you an idea of the outcome but it can't vouch for an unexpected critical hit or an ally bravely leaping into the fray. Expressive animation, hit-pauses and anime cutaways heighten the sense of physical weight: fire spells erupt with volcanic fury, and there's nothing quite like a well-aimed spear sending a monstrous rider toppling from its winged steed. Empowering battle cries and stirring orchestral themes play their part in turning every one-on-one into a miniature melodrama. Finally *Fire Emblem* has had as much attention lavished on its presentation as its mechanics, and it makes a big difference.

Every battlefield is different, too: from deserts to villages, castles to wastelands, from the side of a volcano to the roots of a sacred tree. Beyond terrain affecting movement range, the differences between one and the next are mostly cosmetic, though the layout and makeup of the opposing army forces regular tactical adjustments. Side stories, meanwhile, offer both the chance to gain extra battle experience and to recruit additional characters, and are every bit as thoughtfully constructed as the campaign missions. Thorough players who pursue all the support conversations will find the difficulty curve flattening out in the late game, but Hard and Lunatic settings offer a challenge even for *Emblem* experts. Besides, if you're playing it honestly – in other words, accepting the hand you're dealt and refusing to reload after each death – even the best-organised strategist can fall victim to an unfortunate roll of the dice.

The only real disappointment is the simplicity of its objectives and the lack of secondary tasks. One bonus mission is a thrillingly intense backs-to-the-wall defence, but outside raiding chests and seeking out support characters you're rarely called upon to do anything more than defeat a commander or kill everything that moves. Yet in truth, we're grasping for fault where there's very little to be found. *Fire Emblem: Awakening* is as good as anything Nintendo has produced in the last five years, and as such is very, very special indeed.

CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

PASS PLUS: You can select up to ten of your best units to send on StreetPass sorties. Other players you encounter will appear on the World Map, ready to battle when you return.

VERDICT 9/10
A STRATEGY-RPG MASTERPIECE

IMMORTAL KOMBAT

Injustice: Gods Among Us

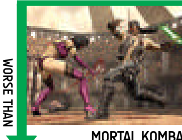
DETAILS

FORMAT: 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Wii U
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: WB Games
DEVELOPER: NetherRealm
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

MK VS DC UNIVERSE





MORTAL KOMBAT

WORSE THAN

So, what would happen if Superman fought Batman? *Injustice: Gods Among Us*, NetherRealm's follow up to the surprisingly excellent *Mortal Kombat 9* revels in the chance to settle ancient playground arguments, and does so with the same kind of fluidity and flair that Scorpion and Liu Kang enjoyed back in 2011.

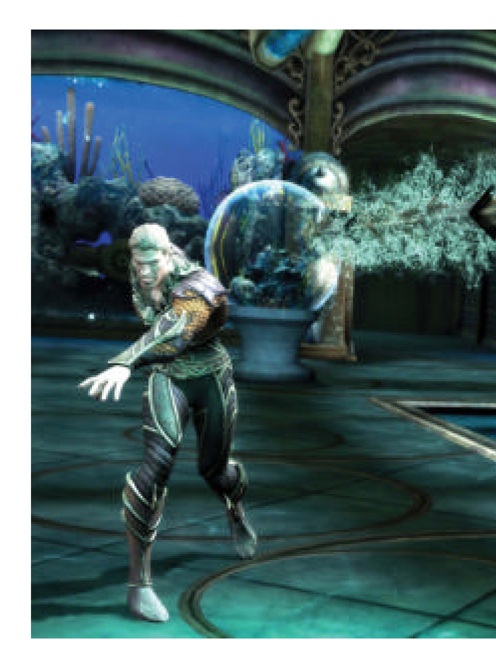
Of course, the actual answer should be something like 'he would crush him in under a tenth of a second', but that wouldn't make for a particularly balanced fighting game, so the scraps are a little more evenly matched here. Instead of explaining this away but simply brushing it under the carpet, though, NetherRealm has had a decent stab at building a fiction where it makes sense that the Dark Knight could stand up to old Supes.

Yes, in what is now becoming an Ed Boon tradition, *Injustice* features a lengthy and supremely daft story mode that moves between characters as it tells a tale of infinite universes and the impact of moment-to-moment decisions. It's oddly reminiscent of *BioShock Infinite*, albeit told with about one hundredth of the subtlety and craft.

The result is an often hilarious yarn that yanks in all manner of DC heroes and villains and gives them reasons to beat each other up. Elaborating on the actual details of the plot is pointless – just enjoy it for yourself – but credit must go to NetherRealm for once again showing that fighting games can still be compelling and rich single-player experiences.

No amount of ham-happy cut-scenes would matter, though, if the actual brawling wasn't up to scratch, but *Injustice* comfortably holds up that end of the bargain too. The one-on-one fights play out similarly to *Mortal Kombat 9*'s, with a smooth combo system, directionally-input specials and super moves that require nothing more than a full meter and both shoulder buttons.

Where *Mortal Kombat 9* complemented its technical fighting with lashings of gore,



Above: Like *MK9*, a stick is not essential to good play. There are no complicated inputs – everything can be done on a pad with little fuss.

Below: It's not a spectacular-looking game, but it moves at a solid 60fps and the characters are beautifully drawn. Most importantly, too, it's animated with craft.



FAQs

Q. GOOD STORY?
Well, if you enjoyed *Mortal Kombat*'s story, you'll enjoy this. It's hammier than Don Draper but thoroughly good fun for it.

Q. BEST CHARACTER?
The Joker is a good starting point – his combos and specials flow nicely together. Those after a more technical fighter might enjoy the Green Arrow, though.

Q. BETTER THAN MORTAL KOMBAT?
Not quite. It's similar and adds some clever ideas, but the brutality and pace of *MK* just about outdoes *Injustice* as a pure fighting game.



though, *Injustice* instead plays up the fantastical. The super moves themselves are unanimously hilarious – The Flash, for example, sprints around the entire planet to get a bit of extra oomph on his punch, while Aquaman summons a great white shark to munch his opponent to bits (from which they instantly recover – it's best not to ask too many questions).

Beyond that, too, many stages feature interactive elements. The Batcave has missiles that can be activated if you stand in the right place, while Gotham City's backstreets have huge dumpsters that you can swing into your enemy's face. Plenty of stages have multiple levels, too, meaning you can blast your opponent through a wall (and often a skyscraper or two) into another part of the level before you continue your ruck.

It's all funny stuff, but the lengthy cut-scenes that accompany the super moves and stage transitions will quickly become tiresome (some can take ten seconds to get through), especially during potential tournament play. The interactive elements can be switched off too, but they're actually so well implemented that they complement the action rather than distracting from it. You can kick an opponent into the background and then juggle them on the rebound, or combo an environmental attack into a normal sequence.

It does feel like an evolution of the *Mortal Kombat 9* fighting system, but there are some fundamental changes that hardcore players will notice straight away. For starters, there's no longer a button to block – you have to hold 'back' à la *Street Fighter*. It might not sound like much, but this completely changes *Injustice's* defensive game in comparison to *MK*, and makes you both more mobile and more fragile.

Attacks are no longer limb specific, but are now flavoured like *Marvel Vs Capcom*, with a light, medium and heavy strike and not a lot else. However, each character has a unique move on the B button, which complements their fight style and their superhero (or villain) persona. Press B with Superman and you'll get a brief period of charge that delivers more punishment; Batman will summon bats to protect him; The Green Arrow will charge up some electric or flaming arrows. Learning your chosen character's 'B' ability will be as crucial as nailing his or her combo strings.

There's little to truly criticise, really, beyond the overlong in-match cut-scenes, but *Injustice* somehow lacks a bit of *Mortal Kombat 9*'s punch. Perhaps it is the lack of gore (and literally bone-breaking X-Ray moves), perhaps its systems and tricks distract from the purity of the battling too much, but it's probably something to do with the characters.

Yes, Batman and Superman are excellent, but it only takes a few hours of story mode to realise that DC's universe doesn't have much strength in depth. For every Joker, there's a Cyborg. Yes, we might have the Green Lantern, but we also have Hawkgirl. Yes, Hawkgirl. During one environmental transition in the Arkham level, you see The Penguin and The Riddler for a brief second, and it makes you yearn for the chance to play as them instead of Shazam, the superhero with the worst name any character has ever had in anything.

There's a good fighting game here, one that'll support drunken post-pub scraps as well as tournament play, but *Injustice: Gods Among Us* doesn't quite match up to its stellar NetherRealm predecessor. Still, credit must go to Boon and his team for pumping out another proper fighting game, backed up with solid mechanics, a fun story and a solid online mode. A justifiable purchase.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

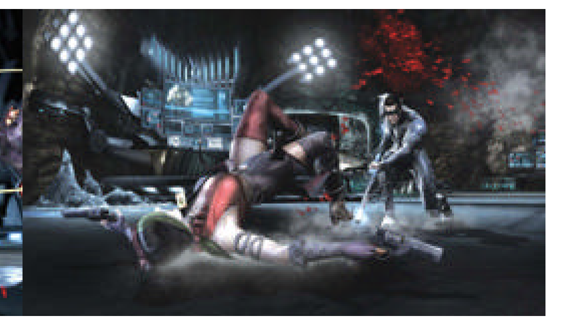
BACKGROUND BATTLES: Interactive environments aren't entirely new in fighting games, but they've never been a part of a technical 2D battler before.



Below: Online is smooth and lag-free, and features the excellent King Of The Hill mode first seen in *MK9*. There are already high level players out there, but stick to player matches and you'll get some good competitive battles in.

CLASH OF THE TITANS

Injustice is filled with systems that play with the shared knowledge of modern fighting games. Probably its most divisive (outside of the interactive environments) will be the Clash system, which lets fighters wager a chunk of their meter against their opponents in a hope to win back some health. By holding the right trigger and pressing 'away' when an opponent attacks, you activate your clash (once per fight), the cinematic camera does its thing, and both battlers rattle off an amusing one liner before the betting begins. Then, you can choose to bet a quarter, half or two thirds of your meter in a blind bet, and if you win, you either win back health or deal damage to your enemy.



VERDICT 7/10
FUN, TECHNICAL AND AFFABLE, BUT NOT ELITE TIER

TWO WRONGS DON'T MAKE A RIGHT

Army Of Two: The Devil's Cartel

Should you really watch Eighties action movie classics like *Commando* and *Cobra* without a sense of irony? They're arguably easier films to enjoy today with the benefit of hindsight, and looking back at the one-dimensional characters, ridiculous muscles and enormous kill counts, understanding the male power fantasy has never been easier. They don't make films like that any more (*The Expendables* doesn't count). There's an over reliance on CGI that sucks the heightened realism out of things, but they are plenty of examples of videogames that have been more than happy to pick up where they left off.

The *Army Of Two* series has been gleefully shooting its way through the current generation without evolving its formula a great deal in the process. Barring the odd tightening of its co-op mechanic and the visual polish applied to each outing, the endless corridors and mindless goons, one-liners, fist-bumps and occasionally insensitive stereotypes, it's been business as usual. None of that has changed in *The Devil's Cartel*, though the presence of developers bearing the name 'Visceral' initially filled us with some hope that the ingenuity behind *Dead Space* might find its way into the second sequel.

Unfortunately, that's not the case. If anything, *The Devil's Cartel* plays things so straight you could argue its inability to advance towards anything resembling change is a step back for the series. Visceral has been keen to point out that it's approaching *Army Of Two* with a sense of knowing and has tweaked things just enough to avoid the usual criticisms levelled at the series. In doing so it's removed the only real distinguishing feature of a series that was bordering on bland before; here it's hard to remember exactly what happened twenty seconds after putting the controller down.

The setup desperately tugs at the American fear of South America and its drug cartels and spins a story that's so obvious that even the characters occasionally make quips and deride its simplicity. This should be a wink and a nod that Visceral is in on the joke, that it knows how crass everything is, but as before, it's difficult to associate positive emotions with the two automatons that are the pair of playable characters. Alpha and Bravo replace Salem and Rios, who pop-up as an integral if throwaway part of the plot, and just like before the pair are given the Eighties action movie set-up of killing as many 'bad guys' as possible and saving the day. As we say, you're unlikely to remember much of it once you've turned the machine off.

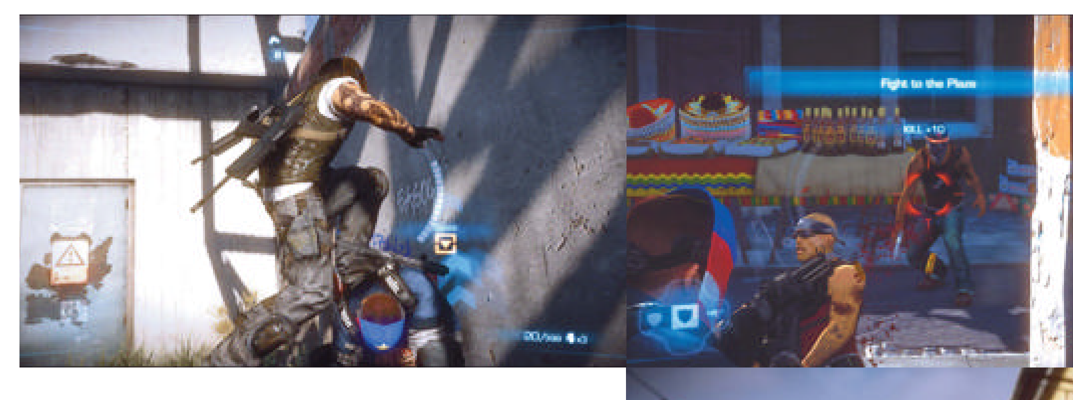
Killing is precisely all that you do, too, and when placed in comparison to the recent *Gears Of War: Judgment,* it's painfully obvious why Epic's series can get away with its tongue-in-cheek machismo and bravado. Put simply, its gameplay has a firm grasp on how best to utilise co-op play, cover and just the right amount of exploding ammunition to keeps things fresh. *The Devil's Cartel*'s tight corridors and identical enemies require little improvisation and skill

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Visceral Montreal
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Above: One thing Visceral has added, and this is clearly where its work on *Dead Space* begins to shine through, is the violence present in *The Devil's Cartel*. Legs, arms and heads fly in all manner of directions when the shooting starts.



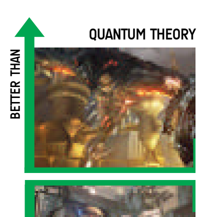
Above: Boosting your partner up to a new area is really the extent of the co-op mechanics in *The Devil's Cartel*. Beyond the 'co-opetition' there's no reason to play with a friend and it's an element that the series really misses.

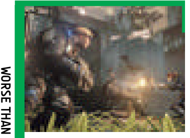
IT'S HARD TO REMEMBER EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED TWENTY SECONDS AFTER PUTTING THE CONTROLLER DOWN



BETTER THAN

QUANTUM THEORY





WORSE THAN

GEARS OF WAR: JUDGMENT

FAQs

Q. CAN I STILL PLAY ALONE?
You can, but you'd be missing the point and forced to deal with AI.

Q. IS THERE STILL MULTIPLAYER?
Unfortunately, no. It's not clear why Visceral decided not to include a multiplayer mode.

Q. IS IT EASY TO JUST DROP INTO CO-OP?
Again, no. Joining a game with a friend will see you both reset to the chapter's beginning.

THE MONEY SHOT

Most notably lacking from *The Devil's Cartel* are any real setpiece moments that get the blood flowing. For a game featuring quite so many explosions it's a real achievement that none make an impact. Even when you're given a helicopter to hang out of or a car racing down a freeway, to defend – there's a lack of imagination that hurts just how much fun can be had. This is surprising given just how much thought has gone into Visceral's *Dead Space* series and even strange when you consider how it implemented co-op in *Dead Space 3*. *The Devil's Cartel* is happy to just throw enemies at you until you've had enough or the game's ridiculous story comes to its ludicrous ending.



from the player. Just like the big-screen baddies of Arnie's films, these are simply cannon fodder.

Alpha and Bravo make their way through South America's most recognisable locations and DICE's Frostbite Engine is put to genuine good use. Like *Max Payne 3* before it, the dirty slums and depravation are evocative enough to give the action some weight and when you're let off the lease you can do a huge amount of damage. Like the previous games, co-op play relies on both players racking up kills and performing certain actions on the battlefield that are then rewarded. Distracting enemies, headshots and reviving your ally all feed into *Army Of Two*'s Overkill mode. It doesn't take long for both players to accumulate it and once triggered you're given a brief moment with invincibility, infinite ammo and the chance to decimate the enemy and your surroundings.

The result: technical pyrotechnics degrade walls, enemies and most importantly, cover, all in a suitably cinematic style. It makes sense that Visceral decided to use Frostbite and perhaps hints at the reason the levels themselves are uniformly small and constrained affairs. Overkill mode rips the environment to pieces and provides the game with its most explosive setpieces, which, barring a car chase and the odd helicopter section, are largely absent.

The Devil's Cartel's gameplay is simply rinse and repeat when it comes to action. The same enemies continually throw themselves in front of your guns and tactically there's very little choice to make. An emphasis on cover, with a new mechanic allowing you to auto roadie-run between waist-high walls is implemented, but awkwardly so, making itself a sure fire way to get yourself killed as you're often caught in open ground or on the wrong side of what you'd intended. In fact, overall there's a general feeling here that Visceral has removed much of the co-op focus that at least made the previous games worth playing if you had a buddy round. Besides lifting your partner up a ledge or to an alternate route there's little connection between the two characters. Even the fist-bumping celebration, as lame and charmless as it was, is absent.

In its place is 'co-opetition', the most contrived mode yet. It reinforces individual heroics and encourages players to scramble for kills as XP, as well as bragging rights, are rewarded to the highest scoring player. As a mode it's almost non-existent, without a multiplayer mode in which to show off your gear, guns and masks, there's no real incentive to chase kills across the games nondescript campaign. As an entry into a series that has failed to realise its potential, this is safe and dare we say it, also a bit boring.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SETPIECES: *The Devil's Cartel* under Visceral's control keeps things on the straight and narrow, much to the game's detriment. There's nothing here that stands out or makes an impact.

VERDICT 5/10
A SERIES THE NEXT GEN CAN IGNORE



SHUFFLE. GROAN. SHUFFLE. GROAN…

The Walking Dead: Survival Instinct

It speaks volumes to the myriad of ways in which Robert Kirkman's source material can be perceived that *The Walking Dead* lends itself so magnanimously to diverse interpretation. The comic itself is a grim pulls-no-punches survivalist tale, which presented the founding principles for Telltale Games to meticulously adapt in last year's exceptional point-and-clicker; while the ever-evolving television series has currently poised itself between intense human drama and gratifying B-movie splatter gore.

It's squarely in the latter half of the television show's remit that Terminal Reality's first-person shooter has pitched itself, acting as a canonical precursor to the series, roughly outlining how the squirrel-munching fan-favourite rednecks – Merle and Daryl Dixon – became embroiled with Rick Grimes and co.

As cynical ties-in go, the foundations here are solid; two of the most intriguing of the show's cast are conveniently also the most absurdly violent – lending a curious credibility to the action-centric stance of the genre at play. One of them even wields a signature weapon for no better reason than 'because it's awesome.' Yet, even with these flat pack parts clearly labelled, Terminal Reality brutally fumbles in its assemblage, to the consequence that nary a hint of the game's inner potential can be gleaned through the unremitting bilge on display.

The most glaring mistake is oddly its most forgivable. For a game hinging on both the relationship of the rugged brothers at its core and the necessity to rely on others to survive, co-op is a deplorable omission. It's strange too that Daryl and Merle rarely share much screen time together in the game. You spend the game solely in the scuffed boots of young Daryl, with only a couple of the missions involving the two hillbillies navigating through the southern America wasteland together, with communication restricted solely to non-visual radio chatter. This only serves to further emphasise the peculiar relationship the game shares with its source, rarely touching on the ideas of co-dependency and resourcefulness presented in either Kirkman or the show's fiction. It feels oddly detached, regardless of how frequent the game decides to echo the show's theme tune.

Terminal Reality's back catalogue showcases a clear understanding of how to produce a dutiful licensed product – aside from the dodgy interactivity, *Kinect Star Wars* boasted a few standout moments; and *Ghostbusters* at least demonstrated genuine reverence – but there's little trace of that same creative ingenuity within an

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3, Wii U
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Terminal Reality
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AT BEST THE GAME HAS LOFTY AMBITIONS THAT IT RARELY COMES CLOSE TO REALISING

FAQs

Q. IS IT AS GOOD AS THE TV SHOW?

No. The script here is dire to such a point that it brings ignominy to fan-favourite characters.

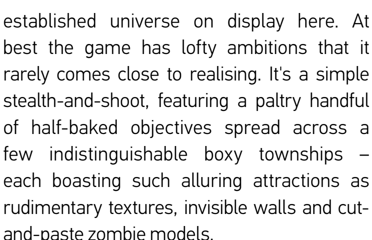
Q. IT'S A SHOOTER, RIGHT?

It is and it isn't. The game discourages engaging zombies with gunfire, leaning more towards stealth.

Q. DO ANY OTHER CHARACTERS FROM THE SHOW APPEAR?

Nope. However, there is an attempt to weave another character's history into the game's narrative.

Below: There is some freedom as to where you decide to go en route to the game's final destination, but it proves relatively inconsequential which locations you decide to visit, given the repetitive mission structure.





Right: This may look like a walking potato face, but it is in fact *The Walking Dead* star Norman Reedus.

Below: Once completed, players can play through the game equipped with a crossbow from the start. But you won't want to.

established universe on display here. At best the game has lofty ambitions that it rarely comes close to realising. It's a simple stealth-and-shoot, featuring a paltry handful of half-baked objectives spread across a few indistinguishable boxy townships – each boasting such alluring attractions as rudimentary textures, invisible walls and cut-and-paste zombie models.

A legion of undead populate these husk towns, reacting to both noise and how quickly the player moves through the streets and hollow buildings. These undead are dispatched with the traditional hit them hard in the head routine, with blunt objects preferential over stirring nearby dormant walkers with more effective gunfire – it's only in the game's final stretch that Daryl's iconic crossbow is discovered, which then fully advances stealth tactics. Accomplishing missions and slaughtering brain-munchers inevitably becomes a cruelly ironic routine, with either the appearance of a bizarrely youthful-looking Michael Rooker or the slow-brained protagonist habitually uttering one of two crude one-liners to remind players of the product's authenticity.

The base shooting mechanics are serviceable, if lacking in response – but not in any way likely to bother undemanding genre enthusiasts. It quickly becomes apparent that it's much easier just to run around enemies, or engage in a bizarre conga line of QTE executions (if cornered among a horde, zombies will courteously take it in turns to grapple the player until given a deathly blow to the cranium). This gameplay oddity can often be the most effective way of clearing a level of all its bloodthirsty marauders, especially given the lack of resources and the impracticality of melee combat when faced with more than one enemy. Scavenging is important, but ultimately lacks meaningful reward to be considered remotely fulfilling. That's fine, because each level features a sub-objective, which often rewards players with an additional survivor to tow along on the cross-country journey.

Survival Instinct enables players to choose exactly how they travel to each location, and accompanying survivors can be despatched, prior to each mission, charged with gathering selected resources. This becomes integral given the requirement for fuel to reach each destination, but even with a full tank, players can either choose to investigate roadside attractions for additional loot, or regardless will be forced to stop due to an unanticipated incident. But there's rarely anything of huge benefit to these crude, ham-fisted sojourns, especially as the game forces the player to halt around a dozen times in one of only three miniscule maps, each demanding the completion of some nonsensical objective – pushing a car in a tiny parking lot next to a clear road is just one such lazy recurrent task. It fails to add substantial weight to the ongoing theme of desperation and survival against irrepressible adversity.

Eventually *Survival Instinct* abandons all internal logic, opting for a finale that arms the player with a near-infinite supply of ammunition to wipe out a camp full of zombies. It's as if the developer simply ceased to care, or ran out of time, or both. Who knows? What we do know is that Terminal Velocity has crafted something truly loathsome and underserving of its heritage. It'll take roughly three hours to complete, feels like it was developed in half that period and will last a fraction of that time in your mind.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BUDDY UP: Given that the game centres on the relationship between the Dixon brothers and how they made their way to Atlanta, you'd think including a co-op campaign would be a no-brainer.

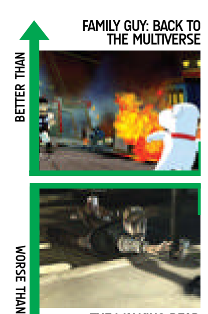
CAR TROUBLES

One aspect of the game that's disappointingly underdeveloped is the life-and-death decisions you make as you discover survivors from each dilapidated town. It comes down to the quite unextraordinary matter of room, and whether or not your current vehicle can take another passenger. It doesn't particularly matter whether you choose to take another survivor with you on the journey, as there aren't any repercussions to whether or not you decide to give them a lift or leave them to die among the rampaging undead currently waiting.

BETTER THAN

FAMILY GUY: BACK TO THE MULTIVERSE





WORSE THAN

THE WALKING DEAD



DREADFUL EVEN BY LICENSED GAME STANDARDS

LIVING IN A ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE WOULD BE BORING, WOULDN'T IT?

Dead Island: Riptide

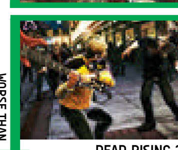
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: Techland
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

AS GOOD AS

DEAD ISLAND





DEAD RISING 2

WORSE THAN

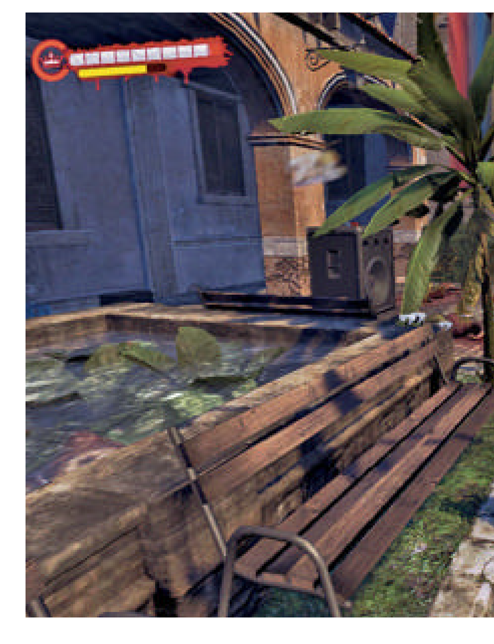
It's no surprise that *Dead Island: Riptide* is releasing under the radar. After an incredibly strong start to 2013, the videogame industry is clearly transitioning through a period of renewed creativity with high-end sequels, rebooted franchises and quality games seemingly released every week – not that Techland's follow-up falls in line with that.

Taking the formula laid out by 2011's *Dead Island*, Techland has – for better or for worse – created a near-perfect replica with *Riptide*, warts and all. *Riptide*'s predecessor had its fair share of technical issues working in tandem with ropey core mechanics, which sadly haven't been addressed in this return outing.

Picking up straight after the events of *Dead Island*, four survivors find themselves washed up on yet another tropical paradise. While it's barely distinguishable from that of Banoi, it is still refreshing to brain zombies in the comforting embrace of the sun instead of the grimy city streets that usually turn up in every quintessential zombie experience. The plot is once again wafer thin, borrowing from a handful of action and infection tropes from Nineties B-movies, as a group of misfits set out on a rampaging mission for survival and escape before a nuclear bomb is dispatched to the infected island. Alex Garland would be proud.

Ignoring the inane plot is easier said than done, mind, as ridiculous fetch quests and faux Australian accents await you at every turn. For some, this is part of the appeal, with *Dead Island*'s hokey plot and forgettable cast going a long way to solidify its status as a cult favourite – we don't know whether to bemoan their inclusion in the sequel or praise Techland's determination.

What we do know is that when it comes to the core gameplay, little has changed, and *Riptide* certainly makes no apologies about that. Once again presenting a large open world, *Dead Island: Riptide* is a playground fit for sociopaths. Zombies shamble the dirt streets, slink through alleyways and creep through the jungles just begging to have their limbs severed with an electricity-infused fire axe. Much like *Dead Rising*, *Dead Island* succeeds when it lets you run wild with



Above: *Riptide* shares the same technical limitations as its predecessor, with hands glitching through bodies, zombies bugging into environments and weapons disappearing entirely.

Below: *Dead Island*'s skill tree is specific to each of its four playable characters, letting you customise your killing machine as you see fit. Every facet is improved on from *Dead Island*'s already impressive showing.

FURTHER READING: DEAD ISLAND RIPTIDE PREVIEW | PREVIEW | ISSUE 129 | PAGE 22

FAQs

Q. MORE OF THE SAME?
Sadly so. Techland has produced a fun, but deeply flawed adventure that never strives to leave *Dead Island*'s glitchy shadow.

Q. HORDE MODE ANY GOOD?
Horde mode is pretty fun, it encourages you to get creative with your weaponry, but we imagine it's better with friends.

Q. IS IT LONG?
You could probably rinse through the campaign in about 12 hours, but if you want to explore everything expect to cut a good 20-30 out of your week.

Below: Some people finger point at *Call Of Duty* and *GTA* when talking about violent videogames, and those people should never see *Dead Island*. Blood, guts, limbs and gore fly around from the outset.



ALTERNATE CONTROL

Control has always been an element that *Dead Island* has struggled with. Though the game offers two methods of control configuration, Analogue and Digital, there's rarely any reason to switch to the free-flowing ways of Analogue. Aimlessly hacking and slashing at moving bodies is replaced with frantic wiggling on the thumbstick, and while it will let you precisely cut zombies down how you please, when the horde starts to bear down at you from all angles it quickly becomes a frustration. Of course, in co-op mode, if you have a friend to aggro enemies out of your path giving you the time to line up the perfect knee-shattering shots, then Analogue becomes a viable option – for most of us however, we are reduced to flailing like a morning star, desperately hoping to connect with something.

THE BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT IS THAT TECHLAND HASN'T TAKEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO IRON OUT DEAD ISLAND'S MANY TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

your deepest marauding fantasies. After you specialise in one of either blunt/sharp/throwable or firearm based weapon, you are let loose on the tropical island of Palanai like the wrath of an undead god. Hammers will break bone, oversized knives will cleave through flesh and the ringing gunshot from a revolver will still attract every walker within earshot to the massacre party.

Like any gathering, a party is better with friends. Sadly, we didn't have a chance to sample the online four player co-operative mode due to pre-release limitations. In a single-player capacity then, slaying mindless zombies only holds attention for so long. The enemies behave like any other from the school of *28 Days Later*, and even some tough-as-nails 'boss' type infected fail to hold much attention or inspire a great deal of ingenuity. In many ways *Riptide* suffers from many of the same problems that infected Valve's *Left 4 Dead 2*; a saturation of content can eventually dilute the core experience.

Many of the gripes from *Dead Island* have been addressed; weapons don't so readily degrade – though melee combat is still reduced to blind hacking at limbs. The first few hours of *Riptide* celebrate violence in a glorious shower of blood, though through sheer determination it won't be long before you've carved up quite the bodycount and been de-sensitised to the violence at hand. From there, vehicles and the newly introduced boats will satisfy your bloodlust for a short while, but do anything in excess and it will quietly become mundane – apparently it's an eventuality of life.

This isn't the only life lesson *Riptide* will teach you: strength is found in greater methods of mutilation. From the outset you'll have access to workbenches that can repair, upgrade and customise your arsenal – it's here where a whole host of weird and wonderful combinations can be forged. While upgrades and modifications are expensive, money is littered freely around the island activating the same desperate loot-searching that the likes of *BioShock* and *Borderlands* usually incur. Heading towards a collection of bins holding coins quickly takes precedence over scoring a few more kills – because who doesn't want to create a flaming mace or hammer a few nails into an already offensive baseball bat?

Outside of ropey combat, the quests do an adequate job of pushing you through *Riptide*'s lengthy campaign. Though they never really deviate from the tried and tested fetch quests – go and get a car battery from over here, go and rescue a guy from that roof over there, go and retrieve copious amounts of coke for an addict and kill the big boss zombie dealer along the way – it's not exactly the most engaging gameplay found in 2013. But it does the job, and is happily supported by the new horde-esque scenarios that are implemented over the course of the unfolding struggle. Sidequests will have you on the hunt for materials to upgrade your camps defences, such as building electrified fences and land mines to help fend off waves of the shambling dead. It's a welcome distraction, but again, your enjoyment of the game will depend on how long mowing through mindless enemies will keep you entertained.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment is that Techland hasn't taken the opportunity to iron out *Dead Island*'s many technical problems. *Riptide* is full of the juddering frame-rate, buggy environments and unwieldy collision detection that plagued its predecessor; it makes it feel and handle like a very long piece of DLC.

And, in essence, that's what *Riptide* is at heart: a standalone expansion. While it should do the job of satisfying existing *Dead Island* fans and fans of four-player marauding, for those looking for the expansion of an interesting concept, sadly *Dead Island: Riptide* falls short of its promise.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TECHNICAL INFIDELITY: Despite a year and a half since *Dead Island*, *Riptide* still includes many of its technical limitations. It could really do with some love and care from the QA department.

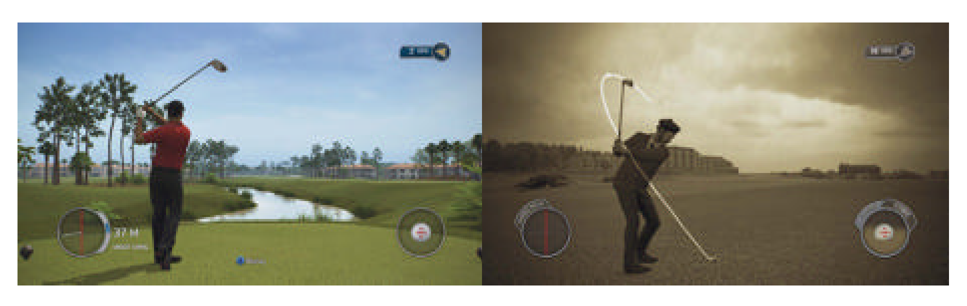


VERDICT 6/10
WOULD HAVE WORKED BETTER AS A DLC PACK

HIT THE BALL INTO THE HOLE WITH THE STICK. RINSE, REPEAT, WEAR SILLY SOCKS

Tiger Woods PGA TOUR 14

Below: For the first time, the LPGA is featured in game as a full career mode experience. A bunch of female professionals also join the roster in an effort to make the game as expansive and all-inclusive as possible.



Rain falls, grass grows, birds fly and every year EA Sports releases a bunch of games that are quite similar to the last lot. It's a process we are all familiar with by now, and your individual response to the whole system will depend on your following of sport and enjoyment of incremental updates. Many cry at the little name changes and model updates, others salivate at tiny tweaks to games they know inside and out. *Tiger Woods 14* is no different.

If you've played any of the last few *Tiger Woods* games, you know exactly what to expect – almost exactly, anyway. This feels like the same game we've all played in recent iterations.

Swings are controlled with the left stick, aiming on the ball with the right, and placing your shot target on the green with the D-pad. It's an old adage, but it really is easy to pick up and play for newcomers while retaining a near-infinite level of nuance for diehards to master.

The big new feature this year is "Legends of the Majors" a trip back through time to experience the history of modern golf as we know it, starting in the late 1800s and working all the way up to the present day. From taking part in early majors tournaments to fictional boss battles with historical golfers, it's an expansive mode. There are a ton of challenges here, and each level has an optional Legend objective for skilled players to tackle.

Levels set a hundred years ago have a grainy sepia filter and crackly, archaic commentary, while golfing in the Seventies gives things a lurid, colourful feel. The attention to detail is easily apparent and golfing historians are sure to enjoy playing on courses from over a century ago.

Otherwise, it's business as usual. Career mode, quick-play, online, it's all here and similar to last year. Online country clubs can now have 100 members up from 25, connected tournaments allow players to see each other players' shot arcs in real time and a new night and day cycle allow you to play at any time in-game. It's all welcome stuff, but only regular fans will care about or even notice the changes.

At its core, this is the same game we've played before. Legends mode is a good gimmick and other small updates are decent, but at the end of the day you are still playing exactly the same golf, in exactly the same way. In a way, reviews of games like this are pointless – you already know if you love the sport and the franchise enough to buy a new one every year. Judged as a new, original product though, it's just not up to snuff. Hopefully the jump to next-gen will give EA a push to revitalise the series.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: EA Sports
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-24 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

RUGBY WORLD CUP 2011





FIGHT NIGHT CHAMPION

WORSE THAN

MISSING LINK

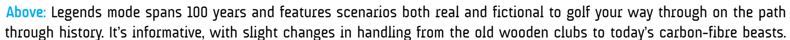
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SAME OLD, SAME OLD: The graphics are quite dated these days and the gameplay is the same as it's ever been. A bit of drastic reinvention would be well received – it's time for a change.

VERDICT 5/10

SIMILAR AND UNINSPIRED, GOLF FANS WILL STILL LOVE IT





Above: Legends mode spans 100 years and features scenarios both real and fictional to golf your way through on the path through history. It's informative, with slight changes in handling from the old wooden clubs to today's carbon-fibre beasts.



Below: While the Pokémon all look happy enough, shortly into the game we were robbed, beaten and then lectured on the frailty of friendship and the horrible truths of life. It should come with a bottle of whisky.





PIKACHU GOES DUNGEON CRAWLING WITH MIXED RESULTS

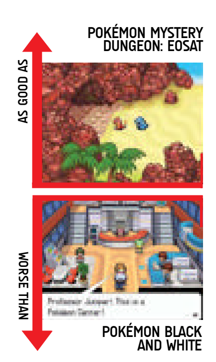
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Gates To Infinity

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Spike Chunsoft
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

POKÉMON MYSTERY DUNGEON: EOSAT

AS GOOD AS



WORSE THAN

POKÉMON BLACK AND WHITE

The *Pokémon Mystery Dungeon* games have often struggled to escape the shadow of their own lineage. You'd be hard pressed to find an RPG aficionado not familiar with the mechanics of your standard *Pokémon* adventure, but the *Mystery Dungeon* series?

Something of a Roguelike, the *Mystery Dungeon* games from Chunsoft have found great success welding unforgiving turn-based combat with randomly generated dungeons, especially when combined with popular franchises such as *Final Fantasy* and *Pokémon*. While the combination often succeeds in taking the niche Roguelike genre out of the basement and into a more accessible arena, the two franchises are rarely anything but at odds with one another.

Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Gates To Infinity begins with the player awakening in a world without humans; you yourself take the form of a pocket monster from the Unova Region (*Pokémon Black/White*), and after quickly making a friend you set off on creating an idyllic paradise for Pokémon of all types. It's a charming story to say the least, though at times it can air on the brutally stark side – it quickly becomes apparent that the Pokémon societies have become corrupted by greed, violence and betrayal. While you feel compelled to restore order, the threshold for dealing with depressing dialogue is lowered when confronted with a *Pokémon* title; the ability to increase text-speed is a disastrous exclusion.

To build this paradise and save the region then, you and your team of Pokémon take to exploring dungeons and rescuing some of the more forgettable Pokédex denizens, and it's here where the cracks begin to show.

Dropping handcrafted dungeons in favour of a randomly generated playground may sound engaging on paper, but in reality *Gates To Infinity* is worse off because of it. The sense of discovery that has followed *Pokémon* games for two decades is lost through uninteresting and bland design. Even as colour palettes are swapped out, it's impossible to shake the sense of déjà vu that punctuates every descent into the dark. Uninspired dungeon exploration isn't the only issue on hand, as combat takes the core *Pokémon* systems and expands them out of the battle screens and into the open as it adopts *Mystery Dungeon*'s dungeon crawler sensibilities. It's still turn-based, but attacks are ordered in real-time as the action plays out in front of you. It's an interesting concept to introduce, but due to woeful party AI and a striking lack of tactical options, it again falls short of the expectation we hold for either franchise.

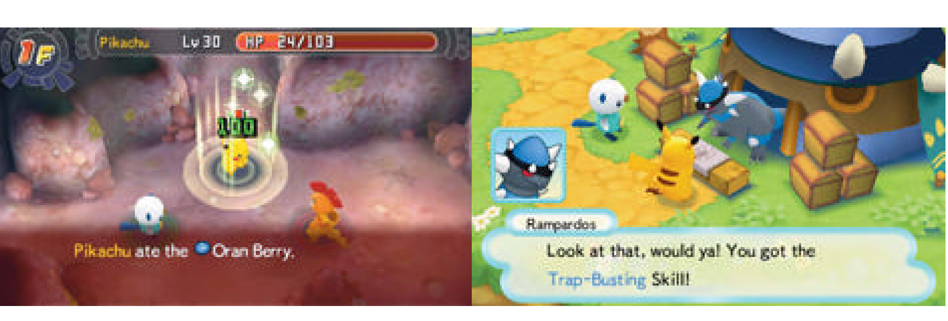
It's a shame, because outside of the dreary dungeons, the game opens up with a spark of ingenuity. As you earn money, items and favour you can begin to expand your Paradise to include shops, dojos and farms to your plot of land. It's begrudgingly fun to manage – forcing you to return to dungeon crawling to progress.

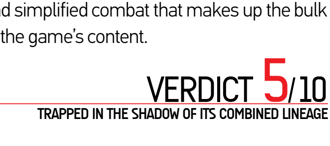
The core design of the *Mystery Dungeon* series is at odds with the mechanics that have made Game Freak's series so fantastic for all these years. While an enjoyable story awaits the dedicated, many will struggle to move past the uninspired design, repetitive puzzles and simplified combat that makes up the bulk of the game's content.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

ROGUE: The traditional RPG and dungeon crawler come together in a somewhat problematic fashion. *Pokémon* doesn't quite suit the Roguelike features that *Mystery Dungeon* purports.





VERDICT 5/10

TRAPPED IN THE SHADOW OF ITS COMBINED LINEAGE

NO TRIBBLES BUT PLENTY OF QUIBBLES

Star Trek





Above: The Gorn manage to possess human enemies and force them to attack Kirk and crew. Set phasers to stun to pacify them, or just turn Kirk and Spock into sociopathic monsters and kill all of the troublesome drones.

Spock is broken. A stretch of steel railing stands between the Vulcan commander and his primary objective. Yet, he still runs – doggedly, eternally and without a glimmer of awareness of his futile situation – towards his mission beyond a barrier he will never traverse. Meanwhile, Kirk is down, bleeding out and screaming helplessly for aid, while flames lick the walls of the engine room and the Gorn militia storm the Enterprise captain. Things weren't always this bad.

When we're introduced to the pair a few hours earlier aboard the USS Enterprise, the two are indulging in their usual waggish behaviour in classic tête-à-tête fashion. Clearly both the game's writers and cast are keen on replicating the dynamism between the movie's two leads, and the opening act of *Star Trek* is made more favourable due to the emphasis on the central pairing that lends it tremendous credibility.

Early comparisons to *Gears Of War* are unfounded – this is an action-adventure game in much the same vein as *Uncharted*. Extended shootouts are interspersed with undemanding puzzle solving, environmental traversal and a volley of quips. Yet, as the game shifts from its early crew introductions, it's obvious the layers of mechanics underlying the experience are either incompetent or awkwardly implemented. For instance, stealth is required in a handful of missions, but navigating between cover is cumbersome, occasionally exacerbated by your partner claiming the next protection point.

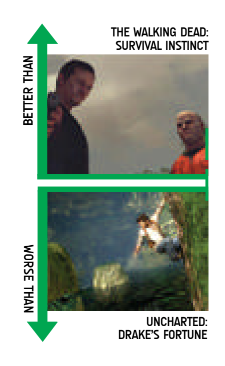
And it continues down a steady decline in quality after a promising beginning. It's a shame, as it continues to generate ideas significantly above its station. A mission where you're handed the controls of the Enterprise fails to gestate into meaningful gameplay, the reliance on co-op play is slight and inconsequential and environments lack the scale to adequately communicate the ambitions of its design.

Star Trek coasts along on the quality of its authenticity, and for that at least it should be applauded. Environments crackle with the luminous energy of JJ Abrams' adaptation, the original soundtrack is utilised efficiently to give the drama some punch and the dialogue crucially avoids coming off like a ropey cut-and-paste imitation. Digital Extremes' ruthless pursuit for faithfulness ignores the agency to engage effectively, and it soon becomes apparent that the enjoyment isn't derived from a *game* per se, but rather a *movie* – albeit an interactive one where the entire cast look like they've been carved from potato.

It's all reminiscent of that odd bug we spotted late through the game: there's Spock, still trying to get the job done – his Vulcan grip on his task refusing to loosen, his green-blood boiling in determination. Like Digital Extremes, his myopic viewpoint has prevented him from acting on the wider issues, which ultimately leads to his failure.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: Digital Extremes
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MIND MELD: One sequence has the player take a journey through the mind of a Gorn, as Spock tries to extract information. An odd inclusion, and one where the player's control of the situation is ambiguous.



STAR TREK, BUT NOT QUITE AS WE KNOW IT

Below: While the novelty of fighting the Gorn is enjoyable at first, the game devolves into a routine corridor shooter after a couple of hours. The Gorn are meant to be a highly intelligent race, but they can't shoot for shit.





Left: Can somebody please tell us why sounding a siren in a police car makes it go faster and drain stamina? The cars effectively have a sprint button, which has got to be a first.

WTF IN THE COFFEE

Deadly Premonition: The Director's Cut

Entertainment is not a science. As easy as it may be for a dodgy camera to besmirch an otherwise great game or glorious visuals to elevate a mediocre one to something more, such elements improve or detract organically, not mathematically. So even in the case of *Deadly Premonition* – a game whose mechanics, when judged purely in isolation, are almost uniformly substandard – it's not a simple matter of lining up faults and tutting at them one by one. For all its many, *many* flaws, Swery's divisive disasterpiece has a compelling story to tell, albeit it one apparently scrawled in wax crayon on the back of an old cereal box. And it's factors such as this that somehow prevent this car crash of a game from being a total write-off, although even after a second run we're still not sure exactly how or why.

Somewhere between *LA Noire* and *Silent Hill*, there's a murky little patch that *Deadly Premonition* calls home. It's a place where everybody communicates via awful dialogue and overblown gestures. One where any given crate might just be full of infinite pickles, or perhaps just some delicious country ham. One where introductions are offered but often rendered unnecessary by the fact you've previously found a trading card depicting that very same person in a bin somewhere. A very strange place, basically. And that's fine, because Francis York Morgan is a very strange protagonist. Fuelled by fortune-telling coffee and constantly chatting to his alter ego, York must be the strangest agent this fictional branch of the FBI has ever hired, but that only makes his investigation all the more intriguing. He's not your average agent, but then this is not your average case, even if later 'twists' do stretch the definition somewhat.

So what exactly has Swery swept up off the cutting room floor and thrown back on to this misshapen katamari of ideas? Well, there's an odd new framing narrative that doesn't really work, as well as Move support in case the game wasn't clumsy enough already. It's not all so bleak, mind – things like the minimap and the refined camera controls help this pass for a normal, functioning videogame (despite so many elements arguing to the contrary), although the refined visuals still can't save it from looking like an upscaled PS2 game.

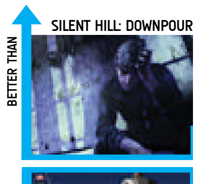
It's not difficult to see how *Deadly Premonition* has developed such a cult following, considering in part how close to *Twin Peaks* the story originally was before it was toned down. Greenvale is home to some great characters and every other line that falls out of one of their flapping mouths is an embryonic meme – it's effectively 'all your base' for the 21st Century so of course people are going to enjoy that. And that should be the least of its issues. But shooting is bad, exploring is bad, dialogue is incredibad and driving is just *really* bad. Still, there's just something about Swery's special sauce that will keep you coming back for more all the same. At once unforgivably terrible and accidentally brilliant, *Deadly Premonition* remains a gaming anomaly. And no amount of directorial cutting is going to change that fact.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Rising Star
DEVELOPER: Access Games
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

SILENT HILL: DOWNPOUR





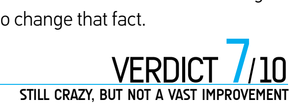
KILLER7

WORSE THAN

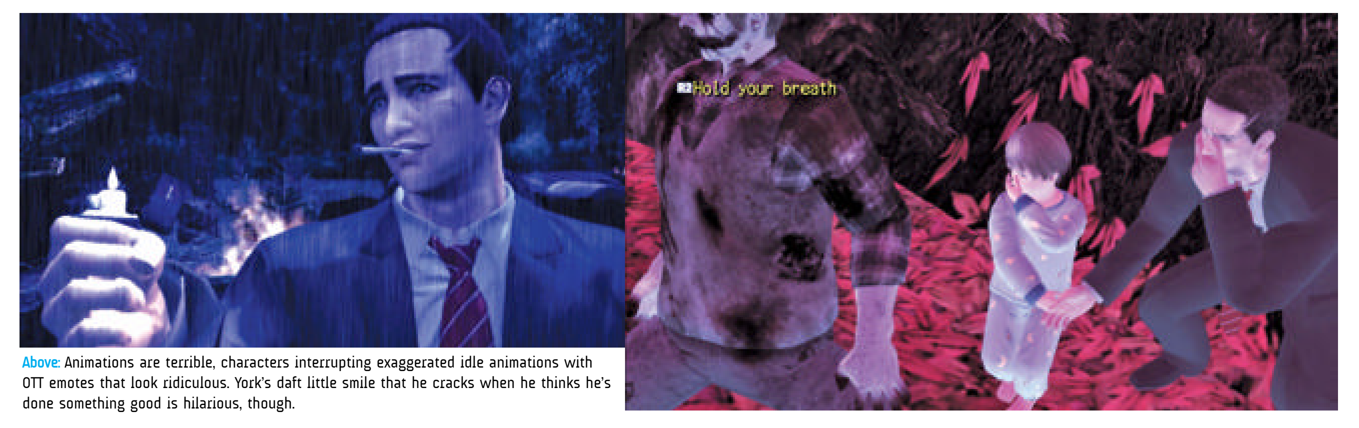
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MORE SILLINESS: A fair bit of extra content over the original game, plus Move support for anyone that found the original slightly too easy to control. That'd be nobody, then. Still, the minimap is a godsend.



STILL CRAZY, BUT NOT A VAST IMPROVEMENT

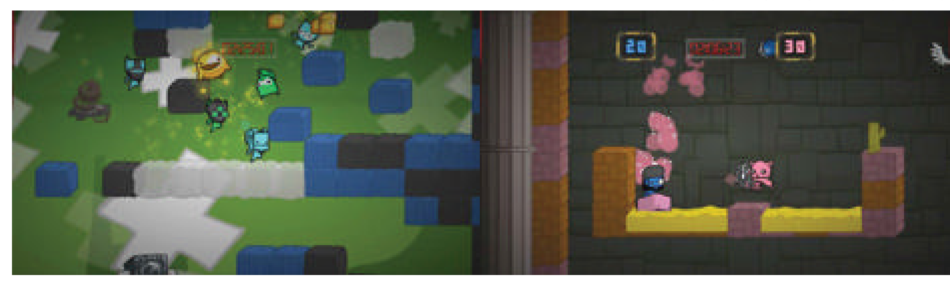


Above: Animations are terrible, characters interrupting exaggerated idle animations with OTT emotes that look ridiculous. York's daft little smile that he cracks when he thinks he's done something good is hilarious, though.

COME ONE, COME ALL, TO THE SHOW OF THE CENTURY. STARRING YOU. TRY NOT TO DIE

BattleBlock Theater

Below: There are some mild brawling elements to the game, and they really come out during some of the frantic multiplayer games, allowing you to both get one-up on your teammates co-operatively, or fight back competitively.



***BattleBlock Theater* starts with you getting yourself into a spot of bother.** After your ship wrecks a little bit, Hatty Hattington, best friend to everyone aboard the S.S. Friend Ship, seems to have taken a turn for the evil. He's now putting on a dastardly stage show filled with explosions, lasers, and death by explosions and lasers. The worst part is, you're the unfortunate prisoner, that is, star of the show, and you need to entertain a theatre full of well-to-do, anthropomorphic cats to survive.

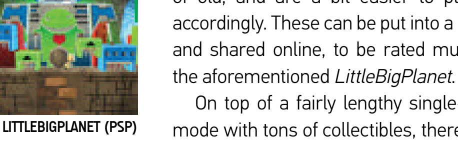
As you'd expect from The Behemoth, *BattleBlock Theater* is full of quirky humour as justification for its puzzle-platformer, this time relayed through a somewhat insane narrator and his stick puppets. It's a little more platformer than puzzler though, as you navigate each quick-fire stage, dodging such genre staples as spikes, nasty water and cats throwing grenades. Trial and error is not only allowed, but it's encouraged, with liberal checkpointing throughout each level and infinite lives on normal mode allowing you to perfect each section. While the controls don't feel as precise as some of the purer platformers this generation, you still have plenty of control of your character through the sometimes-technical stages, and these levels are generally designed around this player movement.

The difficulty ramps up in later stages, however nothing ever really feels cheap. Jumping headlong into the next section is a sure-fire way to get killed, but a little patience and some analytical thinking will get you through in no time. It's on these latter levels that The Behemoth has come up with some very creative solutions for particular sections using its own level building tools, and unlike *LittleBigPlanet* they're much more transparent. This is great, because the exact same tools are available for players to create their very own twisted stages. With access to a grid to create your own blocky stage, level designs look like the graph paper layouts of old, and are a bit easier to plan out accordingly. These can be put into a playlist and shared online, to be rated much like the aforementioned *LittleBigPlanet*.

On top of a fairly lengthy single-player mode with tons of collectibles, there's also a huge co-op and multiplayer element for both local and online play. The single-player adventure has been completely recreated so two players can tackle it, making a second playthrough with a friend or online stranger fresh and new again. There's also a selection of competitive and co-op multiplayer minigames for up to four players that make it as much a staple with friends as The Behemoth's previous outing *Castle Crashers* was. Towards the end of the single-player, it admittedly does start to drag. However, the surprisingly lengthy co-op mode does not experience this fatigue, and coupled with the replayability of the other multiplayer options means there's a lot of fun to be had.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360 (XBLA)
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: The Behemoth
PRICE: 1200 Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (2-4 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



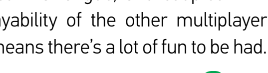
BETTER THAN: MS. 'SPLOSION MAN

WORSE THAN: LITTLEBIGPLANET (PSP)

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

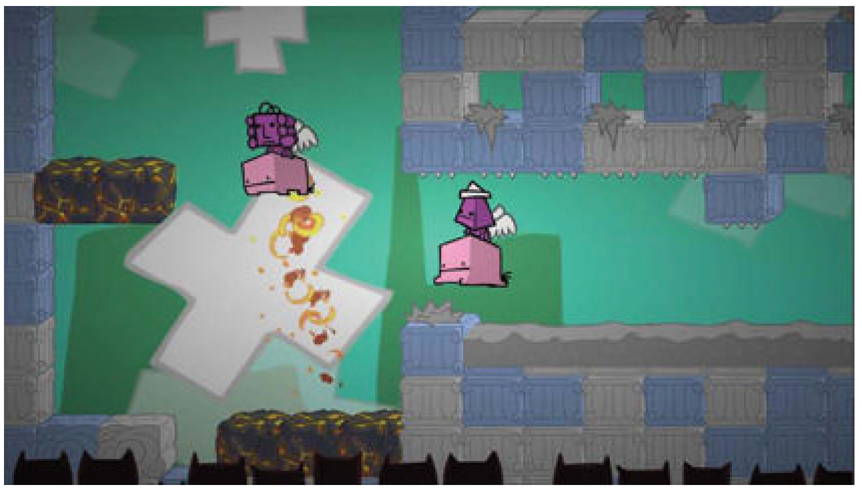
SHARING IS CARING: While the social aspect of *BattleBlock Theater* isn't as deep as *LittleBigPlanet*'s, there's still a great way to experience player-created playlists through curated staff picks.

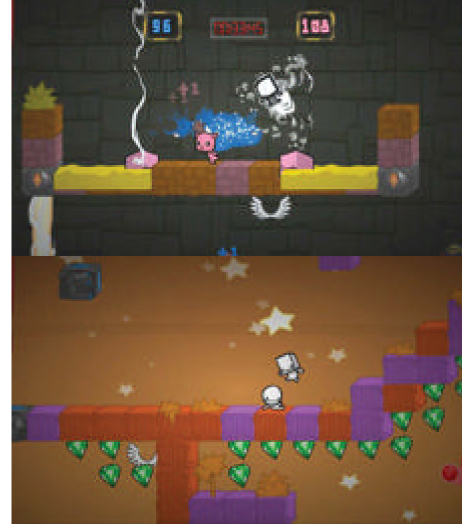




VERDICT 8/10

LITTLEBIGPLANET LITE ON XBLA WITH BETTER PLATFORMING





Above: The game is fairly quirky, having you ride invincible cube horse-pigs one minute and running from rabid mutant raccoons the next. A few puzzles in the game also make use of them in their own special way as well.

THE BEST THINGS COME TO THOSE WHO WAIT

Persona 4 Arena

It's here. Almost a year since it hit shelves in Japan, *Persona 4 Arena* has finally come to European shores, with a host of pre-order trinkets in tow by way of apology for the long wait. Fortunately for both publisher and player, while the delay has been unfortunate, that extra time hasn't diluted just how strong this fighting game spin-off is.

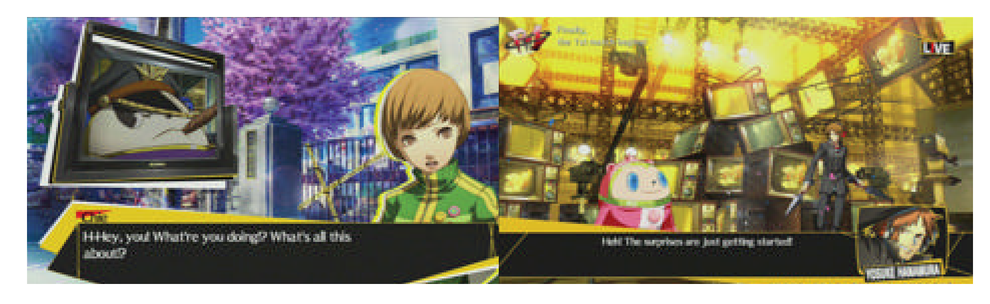
As a collaboration between Atlus and Arc System Works, this packs a lot of mechanics from the fighting game output of the latter. If you're familiar with *Guilty Gear* and *BlazBlue*, you'll be familiar with *Persona 4 Arena*. This is a chain-combo fighting game that has Burst, double-jumps, air dashes, counters, Instant Kills and throws that lead into combos. It's a lot to learn but one concession *Persona 4 Arena* does make for newcomers is the inclusion of Auto-Combo, activated by mashing A so a combo comes out automatically. It does less damage than 'normal' combos though, so it's only really a feature at low-level play and doesn't upset the balance of gameplay much.

The distinct feature of *Persona 4 Arena* is the Persona guardians themselves, unique to each fighter. Two of your four attack buttons control light and heavy attacks for your Persona and learning how to use them is ultimately learning how to play the game properly, as Personas have their own set of attacks, special moves and supers. They also have their own life gauge measured in Persona cards, losing one each time they're hit. If they lose all four, the Persona needs to recharge before you can use them again. It adds something genuinely different and pretty interesting to the genre.

Atlus has done most of the heavy lifting in terms of the game's story, which is dense with narrative and a surprising amount of depth for a fighting game single-player mode. You have to unlock characters and 'cliffhangers' to see everything story mode has to offer and at times, you'll feel the weight of the narrative will actually mask the gameplay side – you're listening to dialogue and scrolling through text as often as you're fighting. A+ for effort, though. It's good to see single-player isn't an afterthought in this genre, for a change.

Online play, pleasingly, holds up its end of the bargain. With *Persona 4 Arena*'s late release, the concern was that there wouldn't be an online community in Europe to sustain the title. While its retail performance remains to be seen, that's almost irrelevant – American players are still active online and the connection against them holds up to playable levels. The pre-match intro scene stutters with suffocating levels of lag but once the game itself begins, the lag clears up and the game itself is fine. Odd.

It has taken its time but *Persona 4 Arena* was definitely worth the wait, with the online community still healthy enough for multiplayer.



Below: Story mode and (by extension) single-player has far more weight to it than anything else we've seen in the genre, with the possible exception of *Mortal Kombat*.

DETAILS

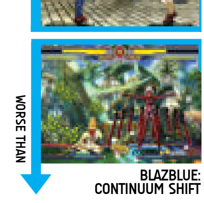
FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: PQube, Zen United
DEVELOPER: Atlus, Arc System Works
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

GUILTY GEAR XX ACCENT CORE+



WORSE THAN



BLAZBLUE: CONTINUUM SHIFT

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

HELP ME: Challenges and tutorials explain mechanics but more help is needed to ease newcomers into the neutral game, as Personas, air-dashes and unusual moves can be a little tricky to understand.

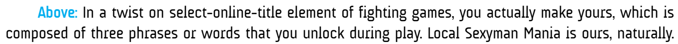



VERDICT 8/10

WELL WORTH THE WAIT FOR ALL FIGHTING GAME FANS







Above: In a twist on select-online-title element of fighting games, you actually make yours, which is composed of three phrases or words that you unlock during play. Local Sexyman Mania is ours, naturally.

EVERYTHING IS BETTER WITH FRIENDS

Defiance

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Trion Worlds
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Massively Multiplayer Online games haven't traditionally had an easy ride with console players. Regular patches, destabilised servers and a myriad of other teething problems send would-be social gamers into the gloomy clutches of the standard shooter experience, leaving many unaware of the excitement an MMO can typically offer. Thankfully, developer Trion Worlds is aware of the prejudices and has created a relentlessly fun shooter engineered to tap into the best elements of third-person shooters, RPGs and MMO culture.

Defiance certainly isn't the first MMO to attempt to bring console shooter sensibilities to the online space, but it might be the first to get it right. Ditching the standard class-based structure that inhabits other games of the same ilk; *Defiance* simply asks you to pick a perk (granting you a special ability in combat) and then unleashes you upon the world to grind for the thousands of upgradeable weapons, and kill some bad guys.

There is no learning curve to speak of, in fact anyone familiar with the structure of *Borderlands* will quickly get to grips with the mechanics; as NPCs direct you to kill X amount of enemies, tag medical supplies, fight off waves of mutant bugs or just generally tear around post-apocalyptic San Francisco on your ATV. It's certainly not groundbreaking, but in the context of a massively multiplayer game, the quest structure makes perfect sense.

Defiance quietly subverts expectation for an MMO title. In the traditional release you'd be forced to either convince your friends to purchase said game, spam random adventurers with invites or, defeated, quest in the comfort of isolation. While *Defiance* sports a gigantic open world, the hundreds of other players around you are happy to simply coexist in the space. Any players in the vicinity of an active quest will automatically begin fighting towards the same goal, it effortlessly removes the hostility of waiting for respawns, fighting over loot and stealing XP while instilling a strong sense of community. Levelling up is a fairly simple process which grants you more perks and upgrades, though with no gear or talent trees to worry about, the game simply asks that you enjoy blasting and racing across its landscape.

Mechanically, it's a by-the-numbers third-person shooter, but with a neverending stream of quests, side missions and exploring to occupy your time with, it's easy to waste away the hours. Any resistance found comes, surprisingly, from the writing. The characters that inhabit *Defiance* are routinely frustrating, with the cheesy sci-fi dialogue and painful characterisations often forcing you to reach for the mute button – it certainly doesn't make us excited for the upcoming TV series. Still, it's easy enough to ignore the terrible story and get on with what *Defiance* does best: letting you bask in the glory of marauding through a vast open world with an army of players sitting (silently) by your side.

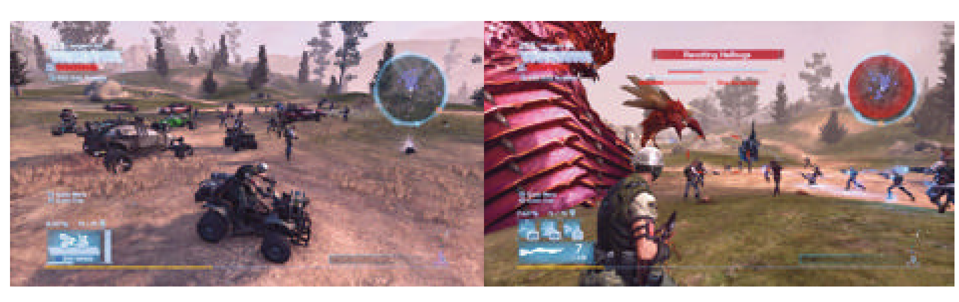
WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

ARKFALL: *Defiance* has gigantic world events where players come together in the hundreds to battle gigantic monsters for epic loot. It's pretty exhilarating to see so many players fighting in union.



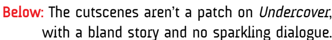
Above: The story in *Defiance* is the only element actively working against increasing your enjoyment. The characters bounce between being bland stereotypes or simply incomprehensibly frustrating – thankfully, you play as a silent protagonist.





Above: While the variety isn't as great as that of *Borderlands*, *Defiance* still encourages players to grind for new and exciting weapons. Almost all weapons can be levelled up and upgraded as well, increasing their ferocity.

VERDICT 7/10
AN ENJOYABLE BUT UNDERSTATED EXPERIENCE



Below: The cutscenes aren't a patch on *Undercover*, with a bland story and no sparkling dialogue.





DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
OTHER FORMATS: NA
ORIGIN: United Kingdom
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: TT Fusion
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



TT FUSION DROPS THE BALL WITH ITS HANDHELD GRAND THEFT AUTO WANNABE

Lego City Undercover: The Chase Begins

We thought we'd seen everything the Lego City universe had to offer with last month's enjoyable, but ultimately disappointing *Lego City: Undercover.* TT Fusion is back however with a slice of handheld blandness that makes its Wii U game look like a retrospective masterpiece.

Everything about this child-friendly *Grand Theft Auto* clone smacks of averageness. The gameplay consists of dull fetch quests, the story lacks the bite and parody of its Wii U bigger brother, being short on laughs and about as funny as a punch in the face, while the city lacks the sparkle and life of its bigger brother.

The game itself is set before *Lego City: Undercover*, introducing Chase and explaining the events that happen prior to his far superior Wii U adventure. Although the story is once again handled by Graeme Goring, it lacks the pop culture nods and wit of *Undercover*, with very few parodies and a few sight gags that barely raise a titter. It's like all the effort went into *Undercover*, leaving Goring and fellow storywriter Mike Bareham fresh out of ideas.

More worrying however is the sheer length of *The Chase Begins*, with a story runtime of roughly five and a half hours. Admittedly you'll have an overall completion rate of around 20 per cent but it's unlikely you'll want to seek out all of the secrets as it has a lot of the same issues found in *Undercover* as well as a few new ones.

The controls feel floatier than in *Undercover* and you'll often find yourself failing to grab onto objects or not being able to walk through doorways. Cars are equally nightmarish, with some vehicles seemingly having a mind of their own and refusing to do what you want them to. There's an overall roughness to TT Fusion's game that goes beyond the pitiful draw distance of the city and it feels rushed, as if it's been pulled from development early.

It's a real shame, because there's no doubting the ambition of the city's size, while TT Fusion has kept the gameplay relatively fresh for anyone that has already played *Undercover.* While *The Chase Begins*' puzzles and quests revolve around the same costume changes – fireman, construction worker, thief etc – of *Undercover*, they're unlocked in different order. The same can be said for the story, which takes you to different places to the main game.

There's no denying that the core gameplay of past Lego games is there and this will remain essential to younger gamers or those that simply love collecting a wealth of pointless things, but it's not enough. *The Chase Begins* has all the issues of *Undercover* (lack of multiplayer, underused control mechanics) but introduces many more. It's the epitome of an average game and one of the most disappointing 3DS releases of recent times.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BETTER FISTICUFFS There's a lot of fighting, but it's highly unsatisfying. This is rather strange considering Chase can aggressively smash things up throughout his adventure.







VERDICT 5/10
AN AVERAGE GAME WITH FEW REDEEMING FEATURES

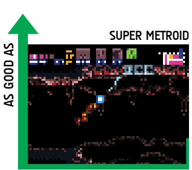
JUST KEEP DIGGING, JUST KEEP DIGGING…

Terraria

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: 505 Games
DEVELOPER: Re-Logic/ Engine Software
PRICE: 1200 Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

AS GOOD AS
SUPER METROID



AS GOOD AS
MINECRAFT



***Terraria* is a game about exploration by excavation.** It's about building above ground and tunnelling below it, bravely charting new territory by day then cowering indoors when the monsters emerge at night. It can be played selfishly or altruistically, constructively or destructively, with any combination of the above. Its freedom is simultaneously irresistible and utterly overwhelming. And perhaps most significantly of all, its greatest rewards are reserved for those who work the hardest, not those who are the luckiest.

You begin in a randomly-generated 2D world with nothing but the rudimentary tools with which to explore it: an axe to chop trees for wood, a pickaxe to mine rocks and ores, torches to light your way through tunnels and caves both natural and man-made, and a sword to stab the enemies that can – and frequently do – interrupt your work. Your first job is to obtain enough materials to build a safe haven from the floating eyeballs and roaming zombies that come out when night falls, but thereafter any goals are yours to set.

You might dig deep underground for rare materials to craft or smelt into furniture for your own lavish residence, level out an area and build a simple village to attract NPCs, or spend your day mixing potions and preparing your arsenal for a night of monster hunting. You could even, in theory, hollow out a large cave, then build a platforming course inside and challenge your friends to speedrun it.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TUNNEL VISION: Simply aim the right analogue stick and hold down the trigger for easy digging.
CREATURE DISCOMFORTS: You'll find a wider range of monsters than were in the PC game.

Reaching that stage requires a significant time investment, of course. You can spend hours chipping away at the environment and not achieve a great deal, although each spelunking session usually reveals something new, even if that happens to be a new burrowing enemy that sends you scurrying back to base. Indeed, it's quite a lonely pursuit at times, though you can rope in up to three helpers to share the load and speed things along.

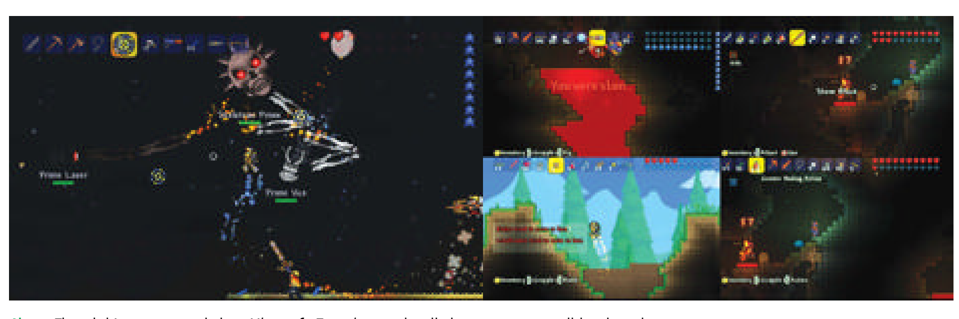
Combat feels a little unwieldy until you get better weapons, though your avatar can leap high and far enough to keep them away from most enemy nuisances. And though a controller can't hope to replace the precision of mouse and keyboard, an auto-dig option is like having a drill rather than a chisel for tunnelling.

It's a slow starter, then, but you'll struggle to find a game this year that offers quite so much as *Terraria*. Even the smallest of its randomly-generated environments – not actually very small at all – will keep you occupied for dozens of hours, each daily journey seeing you discover more and more, as it dawns on you just how little you actually know about this bewildering, breathtaking, highly addictive world. Crucially, whatever your goal is, or even if you're just carving your own path without any real sense of where you're going or why, there's always a reason to carry on exploring, to carry on excavating.



Above: There are achievements for reaching the very top and bottom of the game world, but if you'd rather live above ground than below you'll still need to dig deep to obtain the necessary materials.





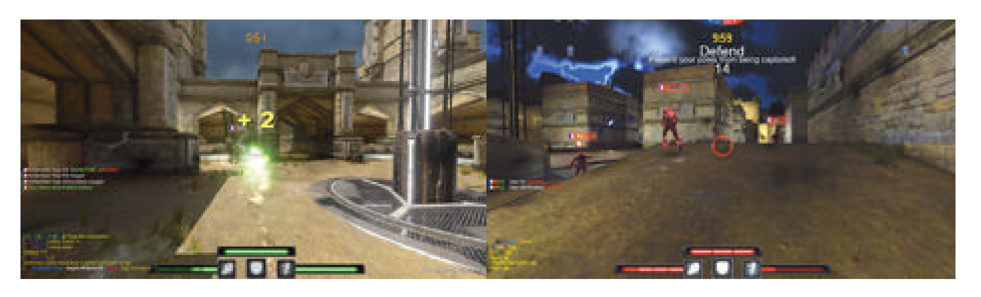
Above: Though it's as open-ended as *Minecraft*, *Terraria* occasionally leans on more traditional gaming crutches: it may be a while before you see your first boss battle but there are several guardians to beat.

VERDICT 8/10
HARD WORK AT TIMES, BUT ENORMOUSLY REWARDING

THE WEATHER IS THE LEAST OF YOUR WORRIES

ShootMania Storm

Below: Players have shields instead of health. Depending on the mode, players have up to three shields, but once they're gone you're dead. Your gun only has a specific amount of shots, but recharges after a cool-down period.



Nostalgia has become one of the most powerful weapons in game development. The indie scene has been operating almost exclusively under this pretence for some years, dressing innovation under layers of blocky pixel art and merry chiptune themes. While Nadeo's reference point isn't quite so rudimentary, there's little question that *ShootMania* is a shooter bred from distant memories of simpler times. A click of the left mouse unleashes a furious blast from your wrist-mounted canon; tap the right trigger and you'll gracefully leap into the air. That's the mechanics. There. Done.

It's a first-person shooter of the most humble breed, evoking *Quake* or *Unreal Tournament*'s twitchy gunplay and unreasonable demand for prescient dexterity. Movement is imperative to survival, and you'll find adversaries spending the majority of their time bunny hopping through the multi-tiered environments rather than, say, crouching behind a rock in the corner waiting for a laser cannon to the face. Adjusting to this mind-set jars with the bombastic hyper-kinetic action that occupies today's genre, but doing so rewards in a delicately balanced and richly invigorating shooter.

ShootMania's few gameplay principles are enforced across the selection of Nadeo-created modes, particularly Arena, which acts as a solid training ground for players to cut their teeth. It's a free-for-all mode with a delicious twist: once the pole in the centre is activated, players have a limited amount of time before an incoming storm encloses all but a small spot at the centre of the map. Such a delightfully tormenting game type sets the precedent and it stands strong alongside a selection of traditional solo, team-based and capture modes.

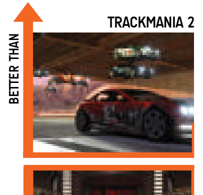
But it's all just a glimpse at the salivating potential that begs to be explored through Creation. Game modes, guns and maps can all be crafted and tweaked to customise *ShootMania: Storm* into your own unique multiplayer experience. The foundations of the level editor retain *TrackMania*'s drag-and-plop simplicity, but advanced options will inevitably generate the community's most unforeseen and astonishing achievements in the months to come. However, there is a significant barrier in place that proves to be *ShootMania*'s key weakness: the interface. It lacks the design elegance to sufficiently communicate details regarding both map modes and the features tucked away within the main menus. It won't detract away from the core gameplay experience (vital in-game information like shields and ammunition is clearly displayed) but there's a lack of basic polish here that only reinforces its standing as a niche product. But it's well worth persevering through the crude presentation because, despite its visual shortcomings, *ShootMania* remains an unpretentious, sharp-edged thrill of a skill-based shooter. And we haven't said that in quite some time.

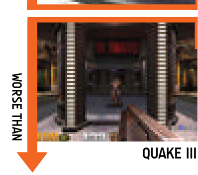
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: SouthPeak Interactive
DEVELOPER: Nadeo
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-16
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.5Ghz processor, 1Gb RAM, 2Gb Hard disk space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

TRACKMANIA 2





QUAKE III

WORSE THAN

FINGERPRINT

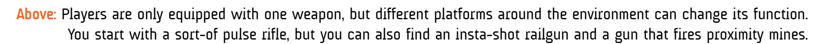
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

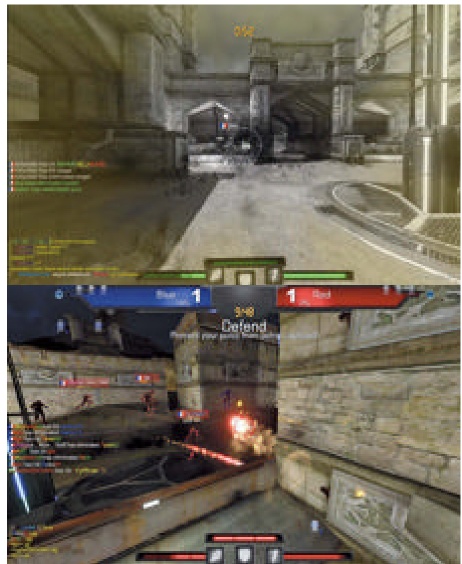
CREATE-A-KILL: The level of customisation in *ShootMania: Storm* is incredibly vast. Guns, modes and maps can all be created and tweaked, ensuring an absurd degree of longevity.

VERDICT 8/10

NO BOMBAST HERE – JUST PURE SKILFUL GUNPLAY





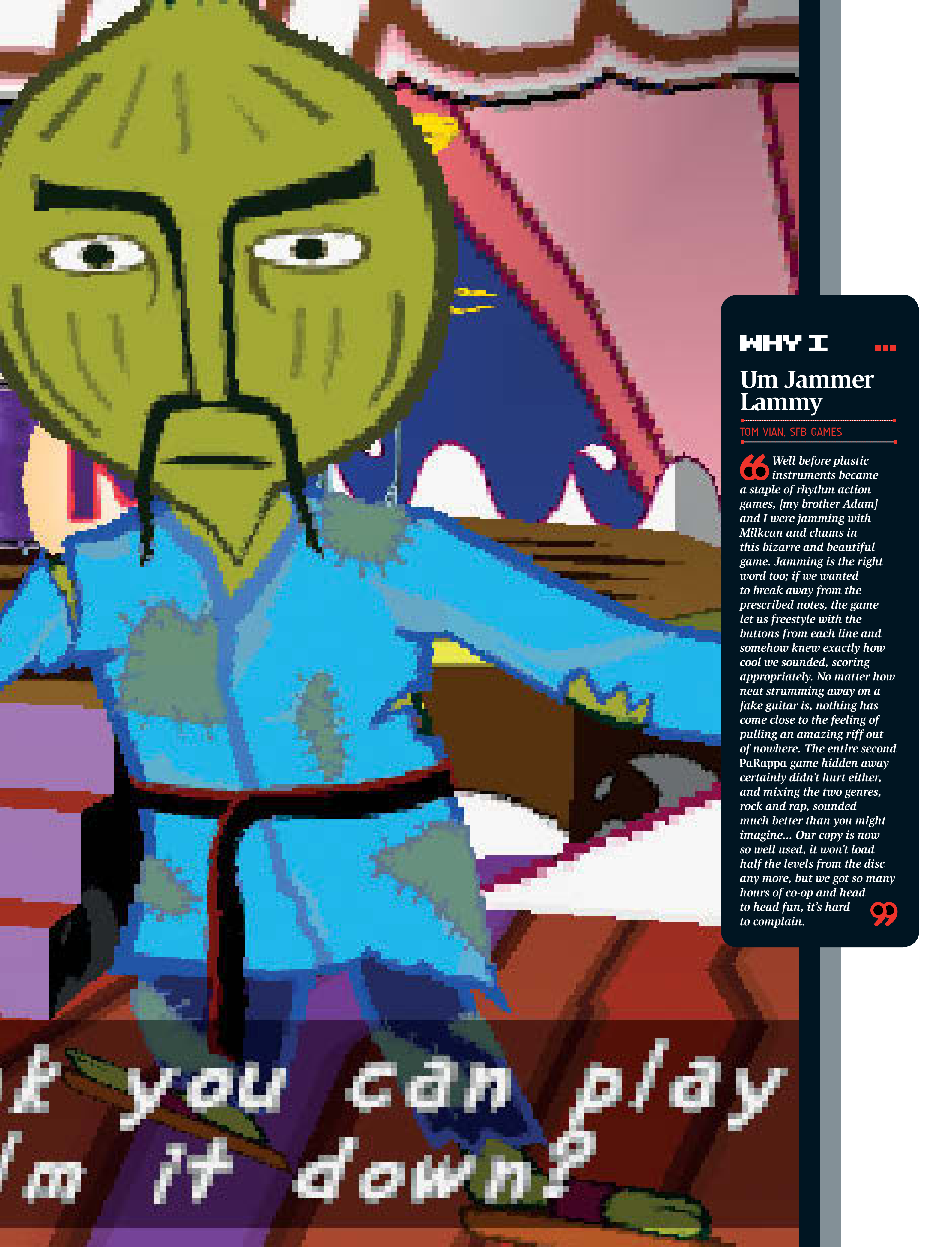


Above: Players are only equipped with one weapon, but different platforms around the environment can change its function. You start with a sort-of pulse rifle, but you can also find an insta-shot railgun and a gun that fires proximity mines.



"No matter how neat strumming away on a fake guitar is, nothing has come close to the feeling of pulling an amazing riff out of nowhere"

TOM VIAN, SFB GAMES



WHY I ...

Um Jammer Lammy

TOM VIAN, SFB GAMES

"Well before plastic instruments became a staple of rhythm action games, [my brother Adam] and I were jamming with Milkcan and chums in this bizarre and beautiful game. Jamming is the right word too; if we wanted to break away from the prescribed notes, the game let us freestyle with the buttons from each line and somehow knew exactly how cool we sounded, scoring appropriately. No matter how neat strumming away on a fake guitar is, nothing has come close to the feeling of pulling an amazing riff out of nowhere. The entire second PaRappa *game hidden away certainly didn't hurt either, and mixing the two genres, rock and rap, sounded much better than you might imagine... Our copy is now so well used, it won't load half the levels from the disc any more, but we got so many hours of co-op and head to head fun, it's hard to complain."*

RETRO



DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**



BEHIND THE SCENES

THE SPACE QUEST SAGA

Sierra's Space Quest series was the "anti-King's Quest" – hilarious, irreverent, and brimming with sci-fi parody. We speak to the Two Guys who made the funny happen

SPACE QUEST
THE SARIEN ENCOUNTER

Released: 1986-1995
Format: Amiga, Apple II, Apple IIGS, Atari ST, DOS, Macintosh, Windows
Publisher: Sierra On-Line
Developer: In-house

KEY STAFF:
Scott Murphy (programmer, co-designer),
Mark Crowe (artist, co-designer),
Doug Oldfield (programmer),
Ken Williams (executive producer)

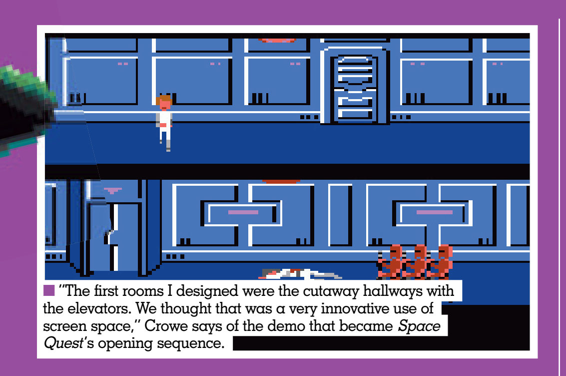
THE SELF-PROCLAIMED "TWO Guys," Scott Murphy and Mark Crowe, met at Sierra in the early Eighties. Neither had originally set out to be a game designer. "My first real project was *The Black Cauldron*, which was an adventure game scheduled to release with the Disney movie of the same name," says Murphy. "It was my 'try out' project. I talked Ken Williams, Sierra's founder and CEO, [into giving] me a chance at working on games. I had to do it after my day job [managing the product support department]." Meanwhile Crowe, an artist hired in 1982 to design packaging and logos, had recently branched out into game graphics and animation and was serving as *The Black Cauldron*'s art director.

Working together for the first time on *The Black Cauldron*, their chemistry was immediate. Besides a love of sci-fi and a similar sense of humour, they also shared annoyance for Sierra's flagship series, *King's Quest*, which Crowe had created art for and Murphy spent many hours testing. "Mark and I both had a heavy flow of sarcasm running during those late nights/very early mornings working at Ken's house on *The Black Cauldron*. We struck up quite a camaraderie in those late hours," Murphy remembers. "We started voicing a lot of 'wouldn't it be funny ifs' while we worked. We discovered we are both sci-fi fans and we were bored with all the regal knights rescuing fair maidens. Boring, boring, boring. Mark and I started talking about how fun a game could be that was a comedy, a NOT *King's Quest*, and it snowballed from there."

After *The Black Cauldron* shipped, Murphy and Crowe found themselves sharing an office with nothing to work on next, so they created a demo of the game they'd been joking about. Crowe remembers this as "kind of a scary time for Sierra. We were in this half-vacant building with a skeleton crew of developers and not much in the hopper for new titles. It was a case of 'idle hands' for Scott and me, so we began throwing around ideas for a space-themed adventure."

He created four rooms, a character Murphy dubbed "Roger Wilco," some new animations, and a few dead bodies, which Murphy then programmed into a playable demo. According to Murphy, "Everything was so different than anything ever seen in a Sierra game. Once it was working, we decided to get Ken to look at it and see if he'd give us a chance with it. We kept an eye out for him in the hallway and finally were able to pull him in to look at what we'd done. He liked it and said, 'Okay. Now make a map.' That was our greenlight." He adds, "We never did make that map. We were pretty sure Ken would forget. He did. He'd drop




"The first rooms I designed were the cutaway hallways with the elevators. We thought that was a very innovative use of screen space," Crowe says of the demo that became *Space Quest*'s opening sequence.


"I look back at the whole experience of how we came to make our first game as one big funny story," Crowe says of *Space Quest I*'s relatively stress-free production.

in to check on our progress and always seemed to walk out happy, so we just went ahead and designed the way we wanted."

■■■ USING THIS DEMO as the opening for *Space Quest: The Sarien Encounter*, the duo hit the ground running. In their shared office, "We had a big whiteboard on the wall with some stuff written and drawn on it and we'd sit in the office facing it and brainstorm, tossing out ideas that the other one would build on or say, 'No, that sucks,'" Murphy remembers. "We didn't have many ideas we'd throw away. We'd just work them until they were well refined – at least in a *Space Quest*-y way. How we think of it to this day was that we'd throw ideas at the wall and see if they stuck." Without a "game designer handbook" or anyone telling them what to do, Murphy says they made up *Space Quest* as they went along: "We would make a starting point, make an ending point, and just fill it in as we went. We would get bored trying to write the whole game before we dug into programming and graphics. We'd get an idea for an existing area of the game or a new area entirely and Mark would go to work creating the graphics and he'd hand them to me and I'd get them running. We'd have long periods of silence that went by but it was never uncomfortable, then one of us would spew out a 'what if we…' idea and we'd riff on that thought. Everything was very seat-of-the-pants."

With a mishmash of influences – *Star Wars, Star Trek, Lost In Space, 2001: A Space Odyssey, The Twilight Zone*, and *Planet Of The Apes* among them – the comedic *Space Quest: The Sarien Encounter*'s unlikely hero was a bumbling space janitor. After waking from a nap in the broom closet to find his ship overrun with Sarien invaders, he ended up on a galaxy-wide journey to defeat them and save his home planet. A text parser game created with Sierra's AGI (Adventure Game Interpreter) engine, it included irreverent parodies of well-known brand names and sci-fi characters, comical death scenes, and loads of humorous responses to player input.

IT WAS VERY EXCITING TIMES FOR US, BLAZING OUR OWN TRAIL

"It was very exciting times for us, blazing our own trail and coming up with innovative ways to use the technology that helped further its evolution. Thankfully, Ken gave us carte blanche to do whatever we wanted for the most part and we ran with that," Crowe says of developing the first *Space Quest*. Murphy agrees: "Nothing went wrong. It was just a matter of what thought we could get away with, things that were SO different than anything Sierra had seen, or really anyone else in the industry for that matter. We bent all the rules and tried to kill adventure game 'hero' stereotypes." As its development wound down, Two Guys From Andromeda was born.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

■ ROGER WILCO – radio shorthand for "received, will comply" – is the given name of *Space Quest*'s mop-wielding anti-hero. But this wasn't always so. "Originally, as I envisioned *Space Quest I*, the player would be able to choose their name and gender. Roger Wilco was just a default in case you didn't choose a name," Murphy explains. "I was too ambitious about the gender selection since Mark would have had to make duplicate animation and we were shipping the games on 360K floppies at the time. And, AGI could only handle so much. So we could only go with the optional name thing. We thought people would love to see their name in the messages." By the time *Space Quest III* came along, it was clear that press and fans thought of *Space Quest* as '*The Adventures Of Roger Wilco*' so they dropped the name option – something they would have had to do, anyway, with the introduction of voice acting in *Space Quest IV*.

"I never got sick of Mark," Murphy says of the Two Guys' collaboration. "Having never been partners with anyone else we didn't actually know how well we worked together."



Murphy remembers little about *SQII*'s development "other than me being the only programmer on it and it taking 14 months with very, very little time off."

FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
MUSICALLYINSPIRED

"I was young when I played the original EGA version of the first game. I'm pretty sure that I was still in grade school at the time. It was the very first game that I paid for with my own money. One thing that I loved about the whole series is that it showed just a regular old schmuck who bumbled his way into saving the universe multiple times. There wasn't anything special about him. And the death scenes were just as hilarious as anything else that Scott and Mark could come up with. To this day I still don't know what a 'pantload' is but I still think it's one of the funniest phrases I've ever heard."

Mark Crowe and Scott Murphy see each other for the first time in twenty years.

Sierra had prominently featured series creator Roberta Williams on the *King's Quest* packaging and wanted to do the same with Murphy and Crowe for *Space Quest*. "We were a little uncomfortable with the idea of being in the limelight as we had no idea how the game would be received, so we came up with the idea of alien alter egos," Crowe explains. "It was all kind of last minute. I hit a couple Halloween shops and found some red mohawks and rubber Spock ears. We didn't have any spacesuits, so we rationalized that we were going to be two alien tourists in Yosemite. We put on aloha shirts, grabbed a camera guy, and headed up the highway to the park to snap the photo you see on the back of the *Space Quest I* box." These doppelgangers went on to play a prominent role in the series, first as the *Space Quest* games' official creators and, later on, appearing as in-game characters.

Not long after *Space Quest* I shipped in October 1986, Murphy and Crowe were given the daunting task of creating a sequel. Crowe says, "I kind of assumed that *Space Quest* was going to be a one-n-done project and never see anything like the same success. So when Ken started talking about us making a sequel, frankly I remember being scared shitless, because neither of us had been thinking beyond *Space Quest I* at all. We didn't have the first idea of what Roger's next adventure could be." Luckily, "it didn't take too much beer and pizza before we w[illegible]re [illegible] in action throwing ideas at the wall." Th[illegible]ne up with *Space Quest II: Vohaul's R[illegible]venge*, in which Roger Wilco deflected an invasion of cloned insurance salesmen to take down Sludge Vohaul, the maniacal cyborg revealed to be responsible for the first game's Sarien plot.

THOUGH THEY WERE pleasantly surprised by *Space Quest*'s success, the sequel came with added pressure. "During *Space Quest I* we'd look at each other wondering on occasion what the hell we'd gotten ourselves into and we'd laugh most of the time. [It] was a pressure-free game for the most part because no one had *any* expectations," Murphy says. But with *Space Quest II*, they had fans and sales targets to satisfy – pressures that would mount with each subsequent game.

The first two *SQ* instalments were cut from the same cloth, but *Space Quest III: The Pirates Of Pestulon* brought some major changes to the series with the move to Sierra's SCI engine. For Murphy,

I KIND OF ASSUMED THAT SPACE QUEST WAS GOING TO BE A ONE-N-DONE PROJECT

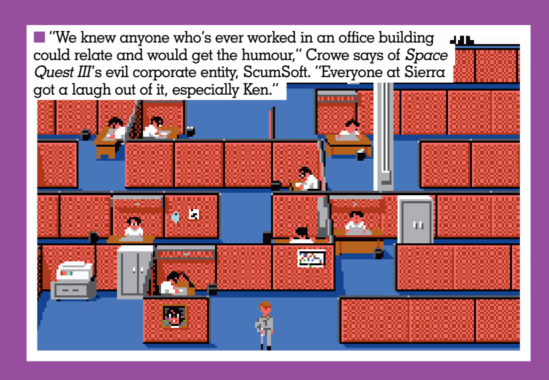
"the big change was learning a new way of progr[illegible] Being [illegible]omeone who [illegible] graduated high school and learn[illegible]d some Applesoft [illegible]SIC and th[illegible] into [illegible]aight-line AG[illegible] [illegible]object-orien[illegible]d SCI [illegible]as a H[illegible]GE change a[illegible] [illegible]ne time to [illegible] Crowe[illegible] however, foun[illegible] SC[illegible] [illegible]phical improvements liberating: "The increased

THE PRICE OF PARODY

■ **"THERE WERE A** lot of rumours about us getting sued by a long list of people and companies. We were only threatened by a few actually," Murphy says of *Space Quest*'s numerous parodies. "The first was by a toy store chain called Toys-R-Us. We had a store called Droids-R-Us. After we shipped the first version of *SQ1* we received a letter from their legal department saying we couldn't use "R-Us". At first Ken [Williams, Sierra's CEO] was all gutsy about it and made fun of them in front of us. They even owed Sierra $75,000 dollars at the time. Just a few hours later, though, Ken slinked in and told us to change it. Mark changed the 'R' to a 'B' and that was that." Other complaints came from Energizer (its iconic pink bunny trolls the streets in *SQIV*) and electronics chain Radio Shack (a "Radio Shock" store had to be renamed "HZ So Good"). But in spite of all the *Star Wars* satire, Murphy says George Lucas never gave them any trouble. "*Star Wars* references included a TIE-fighter in the junk freighter in *SQIII*. They never complained. Mark had painted in a graffiti style, on the side, 'The Empire Sucks.' As anyone who's seen *Star Wars* knows, the Empire were the bad guys, so it wasn't a slam on *Star Wars* – except to Ken Williams. He made Mark take it out because he was afraid Lucas would sue us. Which was ridiculous, but he signed the paychecks."






■ "We knew anyone who's ever worked in an office building could relate and would get the humour," Crowe says of *Space Quest III*'s evil corporate entity, ScumSoft. "Everyone at Sierra got a laugh out of it, especially Ken."

resolution allowed for an expanded colour palette of dithered shades, along with finer detail. Refinements to the vector drawing program and sprite editor made the process much less tedious and frustrating than with the AGI system."

Gone were the days of Two Guys in one office, throwing ideas at the wall. With increased programming and art demands, their team needed to grow. During *SQIII*'s development, they moved into a common area shared by programmers and artists, having to meet up in random places to share ideas. Murphy recalls, "Our seat-of-the-pants design system was really affected. We both spent a lot more time keeping other people busy and getting less done ourselves. One of the things I loved about having my hands in every room of the game was that I could write messages and dialogue on the fly. It became a lot less fun and spontaneous."

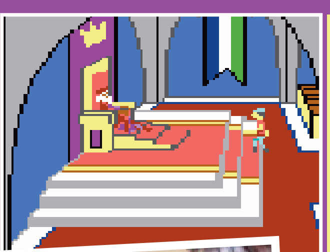
This experience was mirrored in *SQIII*'s storyline when Roger Wilco rescues the Two Guys From Andromeda, who have been abducted by an evil software company's CEO and forced to work on such mediocre games as *Astro Chicken*. In real life, Crowe explains, "We had moved from the relatively opulent custom redwood office building with individual offices to a new, smaller building that amounted to a big metal warehouse. All of development was corralled in one big, cubicled common area. To be fair, it was actually nice inside. But it was a big adjustment for everyone to work in a large open space. ScumSoft was definitely our way of coping with the changes." At least Sierra remained hands-off with *Space Quest*'s design. "The one thing we worried about a little was in the cubicle area with the two bosses walking on a catwalk above and cracking whips over the heads of the workers," Murphy admits. "We thought Ken and [Sierra's general manager] Rick Cavin would be insulted since they were exact replicas of them. But they were exactly the opposite. When they would have people to the company to visit they would come by while giving them

FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
TROELS PLEIMERT

◢ So many memories of *Space Quest*, I hardly know where to begin. Playing *Space Quest II* as an eight year old who barely understood English, but beat the game with a friend using a walkthrough. Not pooping my pants the first time I delved into the underground maze on Labion in *Space Quest II*. Exchanging save games of *Space Quest III* on a 3 1/2" floppy disk with a school friend at age 14, because, well, SOMEONE had to beat that damn *Astro Chicken* game."





Sierra's *King's Quest* success inspired Crowe and Murphy to make a funny "anti-*King's Quest*" game, tongue firmly in cheek.



Though the Two Guys can't legally make another *Space Quest* game, they promise *SpaceVenture* will be the next best thing.





Scott Murphy displays production artwork from *Space Quest IV*.

FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
MUSICALLYINSPIRED

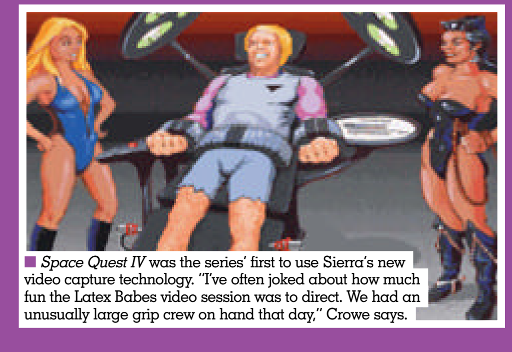
"When I was very young I used to get up by myself and play *Space Quest* on my dad's Tandy 1000. I'd wake my parents up early in the morning asking them how to spell certain words. Eventually they gave me a sheet of paper with common words on it so I wouldn't bother them anymore!"

the tour and ask me to show the part they were in." Next came *Space Quest IV: Roger Wilco And The Time Rippers*, developed by an even larger team.

Described by Murphy as "a darker game from the start," *SQIV* takes Roger on a quest through time and space as he tries to shake the Sequel Police. Getting burned out on *Space Quest*, Crowe says they were having a hard time coming up with new material. "The premise of travelling back to earlier *SQ*s and the future was born out of eleventh hour desperation to come up with an original story. I remember thinking, man, how inbred do we get with this before someone calls us on it? Can we get away with it? Or will they see through our plan to trim production time by recycling old graphics?"

PARTWAY THROUGH THE game's production, much of the team was pulled away to work on a behind-schedule *King's Quest V* (Sierra's first game with an icon-driven "point and click" interface). Then Murphy and Crowe had a curve ball thrown at them. "We'd designed the game to work with a parser and we were way into development. We got called in and asked if we would consider changing it to point and click," Murphy explains. "Mark and I were both hesitant. Ken and Bill Davis, our new creative director/VP, asked us to think about it overnight. We left the office and made our minds up not far down the hallway to keep the parser."

The next morning, "Bill said something to the effect of, 'No, you can't do that. Ken's already decided!' They figured they had a 50/50 chance we'd think it was our decision when it had really already been made for us. I hated it. Now, that choice seems obvious to many players, but then was a different world and players were used to



Space Quest IV was the series' first to use Sierra's new video capture technology. "I've often joked about how much fun the Latex Babes video session was to direct. We had an unusually large grip crew on hand that day," Crowe says.

typing things in and getting weird and sarcastic responses, and not having to pixel hunt." The Two Guys had always approached each *Space Quest* instalment as the last they'd make, but this time it turned out to be true.

After *SQIV* shipped in 1991, Crowe was offered a job at Dynamix, a Sierra subsidiary in Portland, Oregon: "*SQIV* had been a particularly gruelling project and Scott and I were burned out from that. My wife and I were at a point in our lives where we needed a change. So when the opportunity to relocate came about, we made the decision to move. It never felt like I was actually leaving Sierra, and it wasn't like Scott and I had some big falling out." Even so, his move caused an unintended rift.

"I really dropped the ball when it came to communicating to Scott why I had made the decision to leave Oakhurst and the way I sprung the news caused some hard feelings, which, in hindsight, I get completely." Murphy, who revealed in a 2006 interview that he was still bitter and would never want to work with Mark again, adds, "It's so true. I hadn't given a thought as to why Mark was leaving. Mark was so busy raising a brand new family and some communication didn't happen, some details got lost. It's what happens with humans… err, Andromedans."

DROIDS B US

TWO MORE *SQ* games followed before Sierra's eventual shutdown in 1999, but they lacked the magic of the Two Guys' joint efforts. At Dynamix, Crowe was asked to make *SQV*: "Worried I might get booted if I didn't agree to do it, I accepted." Though he warmed up to the project and the development went smoothly, he admits, "I certainly felt it lacked some of the edge that Scott's brand of humour brought to the rest of the series." Then the franchise bounced back to Sierra for *SQVI*, where it was given to another designer, Josh Mandel. "I found that out the hard way – after it was well on its way," says Murphy. Later, "it was dropped in my lap after Josh had done extensive design on it. We had a great team of artists and programmers. I felt bad for them to have to deal with two different designers. It was confusing for all of us. I inherited a game I really didn't understand and a design that wasn't my style, so it was not fun at all."

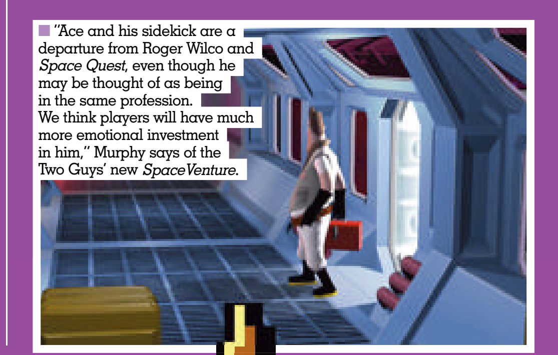
Despite the strong friendship they'd forged, the Two Guys didn't speak again until last year, when Crowe called Murphy to clear the air. "After about twenty minutes we were back on track just like the old days," Murphy says. "The gears fell right back in place and we were the same partners we'd been years before, but I believe with even more appreciation for each other, not to mention maturity. It made me truly realise how good we'd had it as a team." They'd both noticed Tim Schafer's success on Kickstarter and were intrigued by what a new Two Guys partnership could achieve. With help from Chris Pope, a social media publicist and lifelong Sierra fan, they set up Guys From Andromeda LLC and Kickstarted a new adventure game to the tune of half a million dollars.

With the *Space Quest* rights now owned by Activision, the team worked out an agreement to retain the Guys From Andromeda name but had to come up with a new game concept: *SpaceVenture*, featuring "plumber to the stars" Ace Hardway and his robotic dog, Rooter. "So many fans of ours wanted another *Space Quest* but we can't legally do it," Murphy explains of the decision. "But space and comedy can be owned by no one so we're giving those loyal people something we feel quite confident they'll enjoy. And who knows what the future holds after *SpaceVenture*." Though they're working remotely for now, Murphy plans to move to Oregon so he and Crowe can revive their seat-of-the-pants development in a shared office. They hope to complete *SpaceVenture* this summer. "We aren't spending a lot of time currently thinking about that next project since we want to make the very best *SpaceVenture* possible," Murphy says, "but once we're close to wrapping we'll be throwing ideas at the proverbial wall and seeing what sticks."

SO MANY FANS WANTED ANOTHER SPACE QUEST, BUT WE CAN'T LEGALLY DO IT



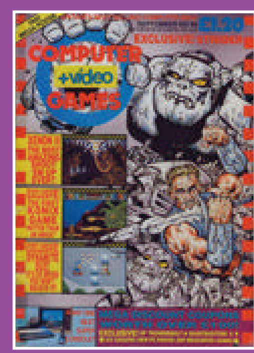
Though *Space Quest IV*'s time-travel storyline hinted at things to come, "our intention was to set Roger's wife and son far enough in the future that we'd most likely never see their stories unfold," Crowe says.



"Ace and his sidekick are a departure from Roger Wilco and *Space Quest*, even though he may be thought of as being in the same profession. We think players will have much more emotional investment in him," Murphy says of the Two Guys' new *SpaceVenture*.



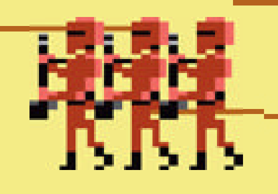
WHAT THEY SAID…

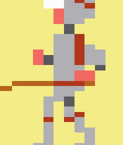


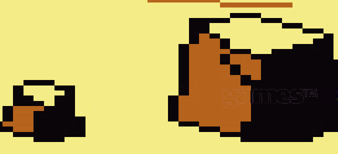
"The sound effects and music (30 minutes of musical score in the game) are superb. Combined with the graphics system, Sierra's latest game is like interacting with a sci-fi movie"

Computer & Video Games, issue 94, Sep 1989











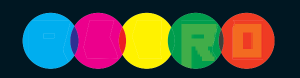
BESTBOSS

GOD OF WAR

PlayStation 2
[Sony] **2005**

■ VERY FEW games achieve so much in such a short space of time. Within minutes of angry god-botherer Kratos entering the scene, players witness the Hydra – an awe-inspiring beast of ancient myth with the capacity to dwarf even the perpetually miffed Spartan standing starboard bow – emerging from the depths of the sea. It sets the tone for much of the ensuing game: an incomparable scale, wanton destruction and a predilection for absurd bloodshed. Despite the brutality that the series is now synonymous with, the detail paid to the flowing combat mechanics and environmental strategy elevated the design beyond its hack-'n'-slash genre brethren – an aspect of the franchise that rarely receives its due attention. But who really cares about the details when you're shoving a pointy stick through a monster's eye?



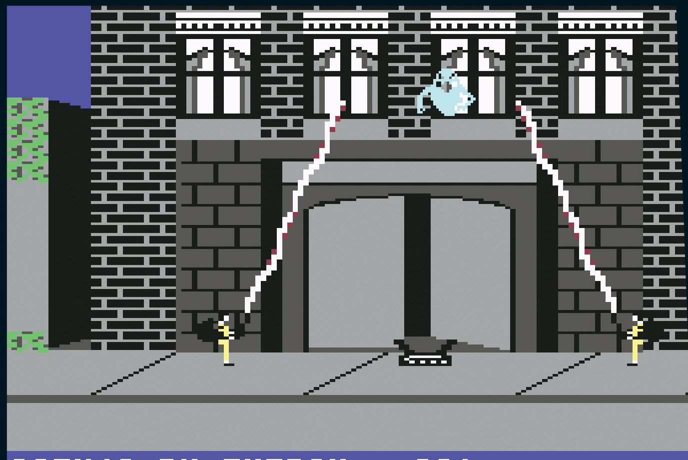


CONVERSION CATASTROPHE



The world's most embarrassing console ports, under the spotlight

GHOSTBUSTERS



ORIGINAL RELEASE | FORMAT: **C64** YEAR: **1984**
PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **In-house**

SYSTEM FAILURE | FORMAT: **NES** YEAR: **1988**
PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Bits Laboratory**

IN THE EARLY days of licensed videogames, Activision's *Ghostbusters* stood out as one of the better examples of the genre. Designed by *Pitfall!* creator David Crane, it captured the essence of the hit 1984 movie brilliantly, putting players in charge of their very own ghost-busting business. Elements of the story played out subtly in the background – sprites representing the key master and gate keeper moved around the game map and eventually convened to awaken the film's antagonist.

Gameplay was split into three sections. The first involved moving the Ghostbusters logo around the city to find customers. The second saw you driving to destinations, capturing ghosts on the way. And the final section was the actual ghost-busting bit, which had you move your men into a good position to ensnare the hovering spectres in their proton streams and seal the deal with a well-timed trap launch.

Originally written for the C64 before getting ported to various 8-bit home computers, it seems that when converting *Ghostbusters* to the NES Activision may have felt that its game needed a few bells and whistles to jazz it up for the console, and it's this tampering that is the biggest issue with this disappointing conversion.

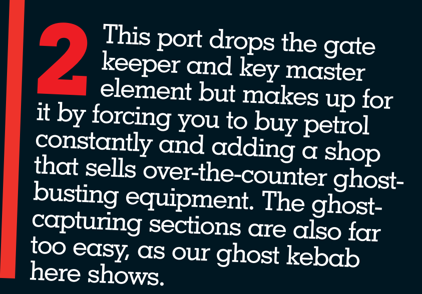
Not only does the NES version get off to a bad start by dropping the amusing karaoke-style title screen from the original, but the key master and gate keeper are nowhere to be seen either. In their place is now a bizarre shop on the map screen where you now had to buy your specialist ghost-busting gear, and a gas station to purchase fuel for your car. It also made the driving sections rubbish by forcing you to keep the Ecto-1 topped up with gas by driving into petrol drums and avoiding roads filled with learner and/or suicidal drivers that cost *you* money when they rammed into you.

The most un-amazing new addition, though, came in the form of an infamous new final section, which saw the Ghostbusters tediously work their way up 22 floors of a ghost-filled stairwell and their movements actuated by smashing the fire buttons as if playing a bad *Track & Field* parody. It does seem strange criticising a developer for expanding elements of a game but, when they come to ruin the experience, it does make you wonder – what possessed them?

THE BREAKDOWN

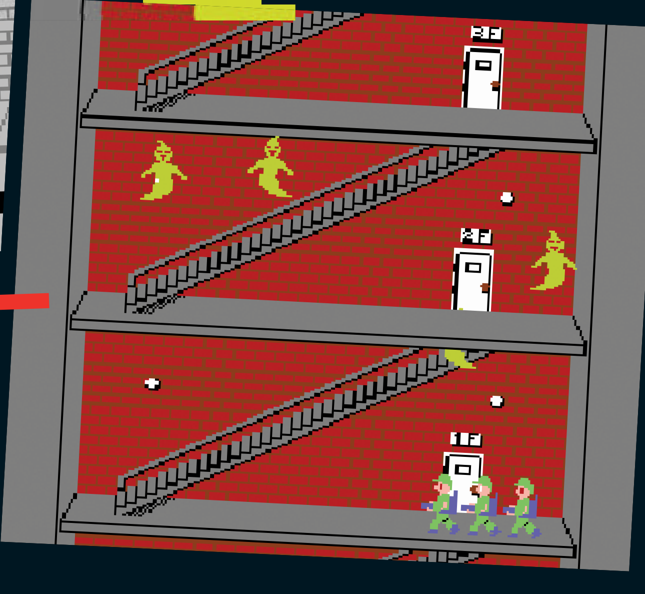
1 Busting makes you feel good, but the bad looping rendition of the Ghostbusters theme tune that plays throughout the entirety of this port does not. The digitised speech in this version is also awful. It even drops the karaoke-style title screen, replacing it with complete radio silence instead.





2 This port drops the gate keeper and key master element but makes up for it by forcing you to buy petrol constantly and adding a shop that sells over-the-counter ghost-busting equipment. The ghost-capturing sections are also far too easy, as our ghost kebab here shows.

3 In the original, to finish the game you had to help your men avoid a jumping Stay Puft Marshmallow Man sprite and then sneak your way into the Zuul building. In this version you have to ruin your thumbs using a control system that feels like it was designed by a *Track & Field* super-fan.







WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **C64** Year: **1984**
Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **In-house**

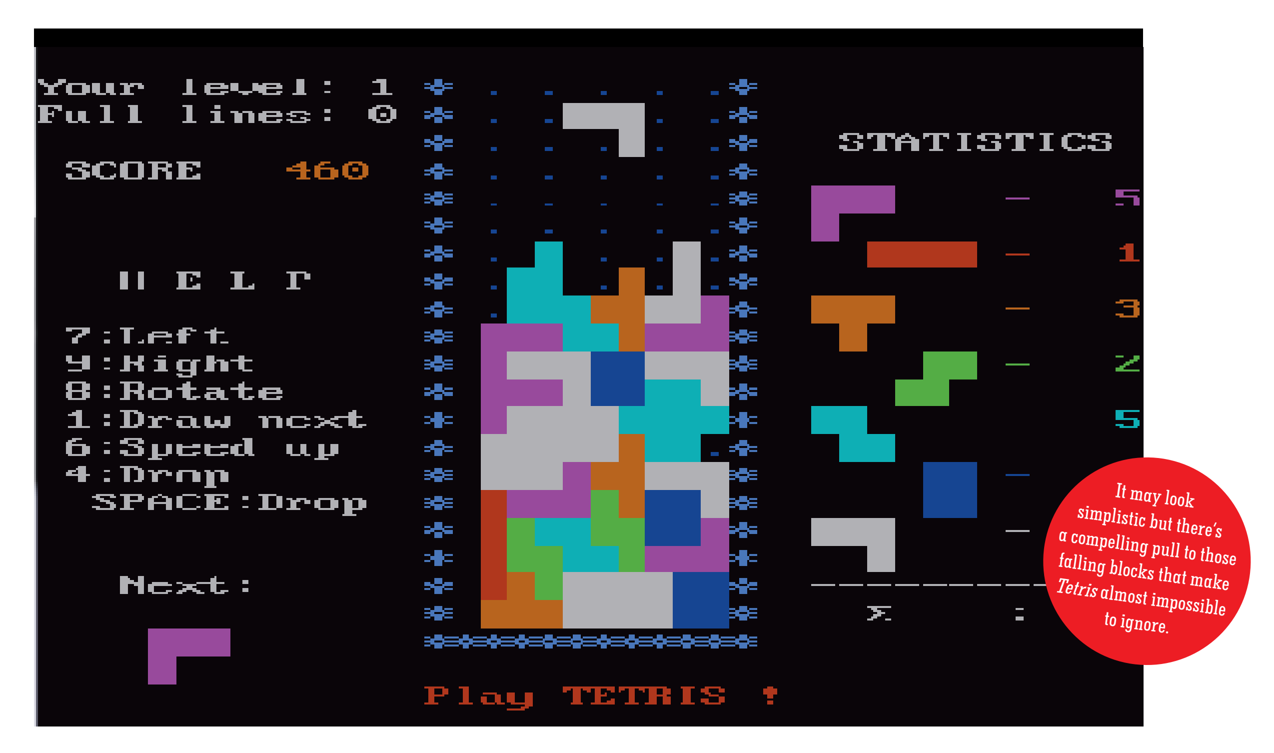
■ *Ghostbusters* was written for the C64, and so it's no surprise that this is where the best version of the game is found. With detailed graphics and catchy music, crisp voice samples and solid gameplay throughout, it's a C64 classic and a fine movie-to-videogame adaptation to boot.



GAME CHANGERS

TETRIS

Released: 1984 **Publisher:** Various **Developer:** Various **System:** Various



It may look simplistic but there's a compelling pull to those falling blocks that make Tetris *almost impossible to ignore.*

games™ examines the industry's most important videogames, looking at their influence and what made them so great in the first place. This month we investigate Tetris, Alexey Pajitnov's addictive puzzler that remains a delightfully frustrating experience nearly three decades later

IT'S OFTEN SAID that the greatest games have simple mechanics at their core. This is particularly true of Alexey Pajitnov's *Tetris*, which has gone on to become one of the most recognisable games of all time, and, for many, is solely responsible for popularising the puzzle genre.

Tetris was created in Russia by Pajitnov and Dmitry Pavlovsky on the Elektronica 60, a Soviet Union terminal computer, while they were working at the Soviet Academy Of Sciences. Their friend, Vadim Gerasimov, who also helped with the game, was responsible for porting *Tetris* to the IBM PC. The trio had planned to create a number of different puzzle games that they would then sell (a difficult proposition in Russia at the time). One of the ideas that Pajitnov was working on for the compilation was a game called Genetic Engineering, which consisted of moving tetraminos around a screen to assemble various shapes. It wasn't fun to play, but several months later Pajitnov came up with the concept that would shape one of the most successful franchises of all time.

His new game involved the player having to assemble different shaped tetraminos as they fell into a rectangular well. The player could manipulate the falling shapes through 90 degrees with the goal being to create an unbroken horizontal line of ten blocks. If

MAGIC MOMENTS | THERE ARE MANY INCREDIBLE MOMENTS TO BE HAD WHILE PLAYING TETRIS – HERE ARE OUR TOP THREE



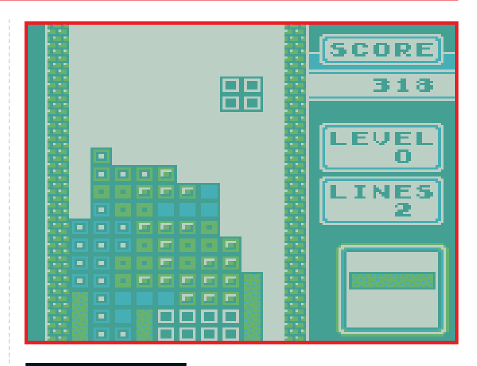
YOUR FIRST TETRIS

★ THERE'S SOMETHING magical about getting your very first Tetris. Waiting for that final four-piece block to fall into place is almost as nerve-racking as waiting for it to show up. You'll breathe a massive sigh of relief when it finally drops.



MULTIPLAYER

★ INITIALLY YOU were just playing against your best score, but it wasn't long before you were able to challenge other players. Beating the computer is fine, but there's something far more gratifying about owning a human opponent.



THE MUSIC

★ YOU HAD to wait three years for the Game Boy version to come along, but when it finally arrived it came packaged with some amazingly catchy music that perfectly captured the frantic pace of the actual game.

this is achieved the blocks disappear and score the player points. Once a set number of lines have been cleared the level is completed and the game gets ever so slightly faster. Play continues like this until the falling tetraminos eventually reach the top of the well. Despite the addictive nature of Pajitnov's new game, now called *Tetris*, Pajitnov had trouble selling the compilation it featured on. *Tetris*, along with the other games by Pajitnov and his friends, were given out for free to friends and family and eventually found their way onto PCs outside of Soviet Russia.

■■■ PAJITNOV WAS approached by Spectrum Holobyte to publish the game in the West, which he agreed to. The other games weren't part of the deal, however, which infuriated Pavlovsky and Gerasimov, who parted ways with Pajitnov. It was the first sign of trouble for the *Tetris* creator, but it wouldn't be the last, and the sheer popularity of the game resulted in numerous legal battles in the intervening years, with a number of publishers all claiming the rights to sell various versions of the massively popular game. It wouldn't be until 1996, after Pajitnov formed The Tetris Company with Henk Rogers (who discovered the game at CES in 1988 and secured its release for the NES and Game Boy) that he began to receive royalties for his popular puzzle game.

MANY DEVELOPERS HAVE ATTEMPTED TO BETTER IT, BUT FEW HAVE SUCCEEDED

KEY FACTS

■ *Tetris* has easily adapted to each new piece of hardware. It's been ported to many machines, from consoles and computers to phones and tablets.

■ *Tetris* is one of the most, if not the most cloned game of all time. Theodor Lauppert lists over 180 clones on his site. Visit **http://theodor.lauppert.ws/games/tetriscl.htm** for more information.

■ *Tetris* has sold millions since its release in 1984, but it's had the most success on mobile phones. While it has sold over 70 million units on home consoles, it has sold over 100 million on mobiles.

And by then *Tetris* had proven to be massively popular, particularly the Game Boy version, which has now become synonymous with Nintendo's handheld. While the NES version had shifted an impressive 8 million units, the Game Boy version dwarfed this by selling over 33 million. Admittedly, it was packaged with the device itself, but it allowed a huge number of people to experience the game.

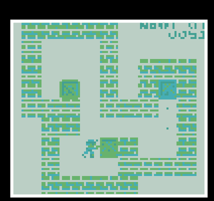
It's the simplicity of *Tetris* that makes it so much fun to play, and while many developers (including Pajitnov) have attempted to better it, few have succeeded. *Tetris* married simplicity to tight controls and simple puzzle solving to create an amazing experience, which only deepened as later games began to offer more interesting gameplay mechanics.

For many it's the original game that remains the best, and this is mainly due to its sheer accessibility. The beauty of *Tetris* was that, while it was extremely easy to pick up, it wasn't easy to conquer, with the continuing speed increase of the game requiring godlike reflexes on its later levels. Then there was the clever scoring system it offered, delivering more points to the player if they could complete a wall that was four blocks high (known as a Tetris). The random nature of each new block meant that it was impossible to predict when the four-block rectangle would show up, meaning *Tetris* offered a suitable risk and reward factor for those that attempted to wait around for the errant block to turn up.

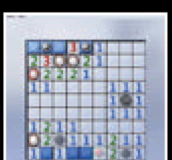
29 years after its original release and with millions of units sold and nearly 50 officially released sequels, *Tetris* shows no signs of slowing down. Its timeless gameplay and simple yet stylised visuals define everything we love about videogames and help keep it fresh for every new generation of gamer that discovers it. A true classic.

BEFORE TETRIS

Other puzzle games we were playing before Tetris changed everything



SOKOBAN 1981
■ *Sokoban* was an early puzzle game where you had to push a set number of boxes to specific points within a warehouse. Poor planning meant it was easy to trap yourself if you didn't pay attention. It would appear on numerous systems, from NEC PC-8801 to Game Boy.



MINESWEEPER UNKNOWN
■ Most PC owners will be aware of this puzzle game as it comes with most operating systems. After being presented with a blank grid you must work out where mines are hidden using only numbers for clues. A surprisingly tense game that's still a great time-waster.



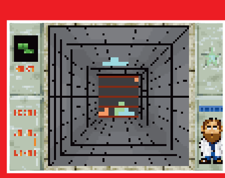
PENGO 1982
■ Excellent block-pushing game from Sega where you control a cute penguin. Kill enemies as quickly as possible by shunting blocks onto them and crushing them. Simply to play, but very tough to actually master.



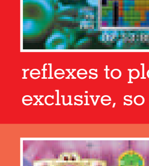
Q*BERT 1982
■ Fantastic arcade game where you play as the titular Q*bert and must bounce around an isometric level until you've turned all the blocks on screen to the same colour. Easy, apart from all the annoying monsters chasing after you…

TETRIS SEQUELS

Far from a one-off, here are the various follow-ups that have taken the Tetris formula and played with it



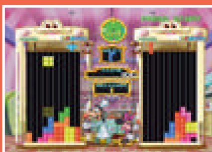
WELLTRIS 1989
■ Imagine a 3D version of *Tetris* with you looking into a well. Now imagine how hard it is to play. An interesting, if complicated, follow-up.



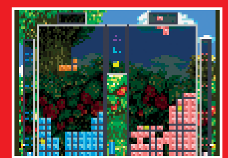
TETRIS: THE GRAND MASTER 1998
■ You'll need Jedi-like reflexes to play this popular Japanese exclusive, so fast the drops fall.



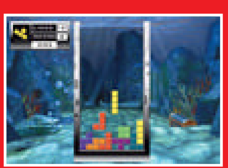
HATRIS 1990
■ Another sequel from Pajitnov with things falling from the sky, but this time it's hats instead of tetraminos.



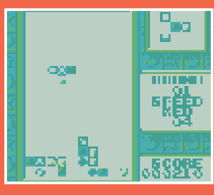
MAGICAL TETRIS CHALLENGE 1999
■ One of the many Vs Tetris games. This one is notable for featuring classic Disney characters.



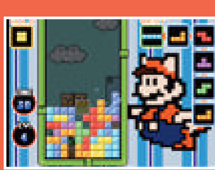
TETRIS BATTLE GAIDEN 1993
■ The first *Tetris* game to appear on the SNES. It features a variety of characters who can unleash special moves upon each other.



TETRIS WORLDS 2001
■ Despite lots of game modes and a four-player mode, many felt that having blocks that no longer locked into place made it too easy.



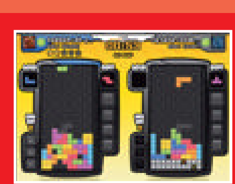
TETRIS 2 1993
■ A bizarre follow-up to the massively successful Game Boy original that has the player clearing bombs by matching lines of the same colour.



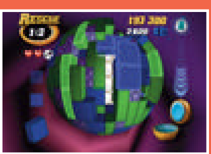
TETRIS DS 2006
■ Excellent offering from Nintendo with clever gameplay modes based around classic characters and good use of the DS's dual screens.



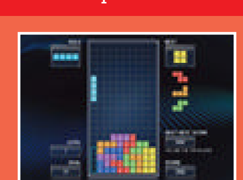
TETRIS PLUS 1995
■ Created by Jaleco, *Tetris Plus* introduces a new puzzle mode that sees you trying to clear a set number of blocks found in the well.



TETRIS BATTLE 2010
■ This Facebook game is a fun competitive game where you must clear as many lines as possible in two minutes.



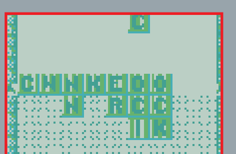
TETRISPHERE 1997
■ Confusing N64 exclusive where you must reveal the core of a large sphere. It's a clever concept but far too fiddly.



TETRIS 2011
■ The last *Tetris* released for a home console was this from EA. It's a digital release featuring the classic Marathon Mode.

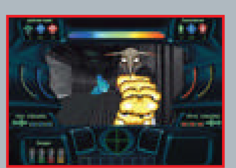
WHAT PAJITNOV DID NEXT

How the Tetris creator followed his biggest game



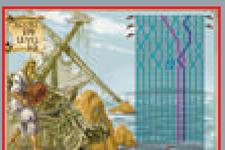
WORDTRIS 1991

Another puzzle game with things falling from the sky, but this time it's words instead of tetraminos. *Wordtris* is a clever concept, but it's too tricky.



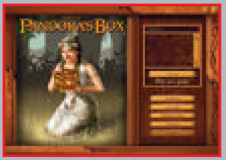
ICE & FIRE 1995

Despite a clever play mechanic revolving around the alternating use of ice and fire, this was a pretty poor shooter. Not one we would recommend when compared to others.



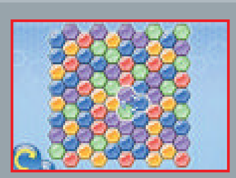
MICROSOFT ENT. PACK: THE PUZZLE COLLECTION 1997

An interesting selection of mini puzzle games similar to what Pajitnov had been involved in before *Tetris*. The game shown here is Fringer.



PANDORA'S BOX 1999

Travel around the world and solve a vast variety of different puzzles that cover a wide array of different types. The current version has over 400 to solve.



HEXIC 2003

Interesting variant of the match-three game where you rotate hexes to form clusters of three or more. It was a free launch game on 360.

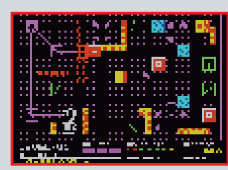


DWICE 2006

An interesting spin on *Tetris* where you must destroy incoming ice blocks and stop them from destroying the houses at the bottom of the screen.

PUZZLE GAMES INSPIRED BY TETRIS

Notable puzzle games that followed Tetris



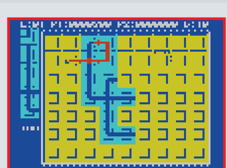
DEFLECTOR
1987

An interesting puzzler from Costa Panayi that had the player manipulating mirrors to bounce a laser from one point to another.



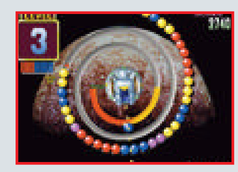
PUZZLE BOBBLE
1994

Use the cute dinosaurs from *Bubble Bobble* to fling coloured bubbles skywards towards other coloured bubbles. Also known as *Bust-A-Move*.



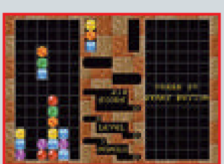
PIPE MANIA
1989

Manage a flow of liquid by manipulating different pipe shapes in this excellent puzzle game from The Assembly Line.



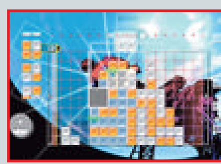
PUZZ LOOP
1998

Stop marbles from reaching the goal by shooting additional marbles at them to form chains of three or more. PopCap created a variant called *Zuma*.



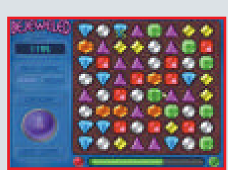
COLUMNS
1990

Sega tried to capitalise on the success of *Tetris* with this simple match-three game. It's decent, but lacks *Tetris*'s addictive properties.



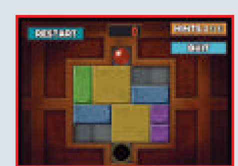
LUMINES
2004

This PSP launch title was a superb effort from *Rez* creator Tetsuya Mizaguchi that fuses music with block-shifting gameplay.



BEJEWELED
2001

Popular tile-based puzzle game from PopCap Games where you must match three jewels of the same colour. Maddeningly addictive.



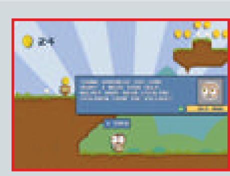
PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE CURIOUS VILLAGE
2007

This charming DS offering from Level-5 mixes storytelling with clever head-scratchers to great effect. Its most recent sequel is available on 3DS.



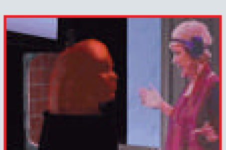
LEMMINGS
1991

Excellent game where you have to guide a set number of suicidal lemmings with specific skills to a nearby exit.



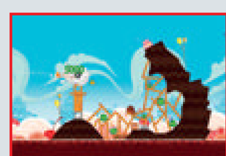
WORLD OF GOO
2008

Excellent physics-based puzzler that has you trying to get a certain number of cute oozes to a nearby pipe. It gets pretty tough.



THE 7TH GUEST
1993

Innovative offering from Trilobyte which mixed filmed pre-rendered movie clips with some deviously designed puzzles.



ANGRY BIRDS
2009

Use a catapult to fire cute birds at even cuter pigs in Rovio Entertainment's stupidly popular iOS game. There's even a theme park.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures





FORMAT: Virtual Boy
YEAR: 1995
PUBLISHER: Atlus
DEVELOPER: In-house
EXPECT TO PAY: £200



EXHIBIT A: Loose copies can sell for around £40, but complete the game's value has been known to reach well into the hundreds.



EXHIBIT B: The Virtual Boy was only released in Japan and North America. It's far easier – and cheaper – to aim for a full US set.

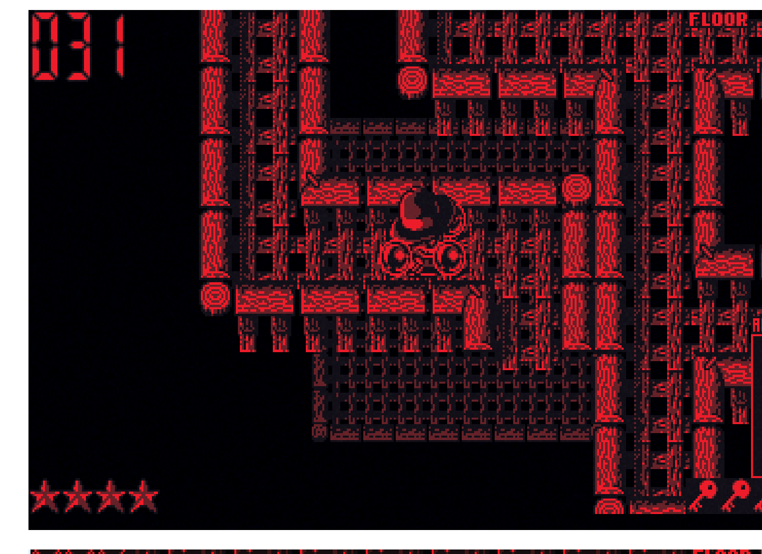


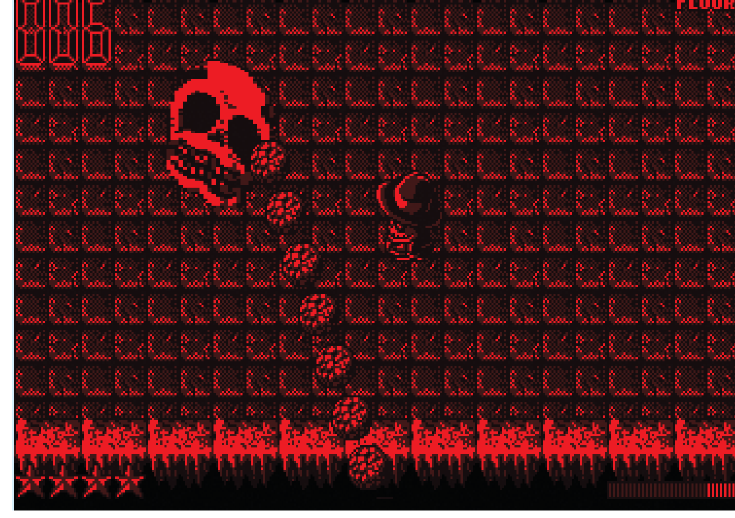
EXHIBIT C: *Jack Bros.* is a good-looking game. This is also true for its packaging, which features some eye-catching artwork.

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Why It's Rare

THE VIRTUAL BOY failed to strike a chord with gamers. In development concurrently with the N64, it is believed to have caused Nintendo to push the console to market early. Looking like portable eye test apparatus rather than a portable games console, many consumers were confused as to what it actually was. Upon its release, a lack of software and its 3D technology hampered by its monochrome visuals and reports of it causing headaches turned even more off. And yet from a collector standpoint the machine has since become an appealing prospect. Not only is there nothing else quite like it, but it also has a modest library of 22 games, meaning that obtaining a full software set is certainly achievable. The four rarest games for the machine are the Japan-only *Virtual Bowling*, *Virtual Lab*, *SD Gundam Dimension Wars* and *Space Invaders Virtual Collection*. However, if it's a complete US set you're setting your sights on then *Jack Bros.* is widely seen as the hardest title to acquire. It's developed and published by Atlus, a company well known for releasing small print runs of its games outside of Japan, and *Jack Bros.* is no exception. An uncommon game on a console that didn't sell big numbers is a simple recipe for rarity.





WORTH PLAYING?

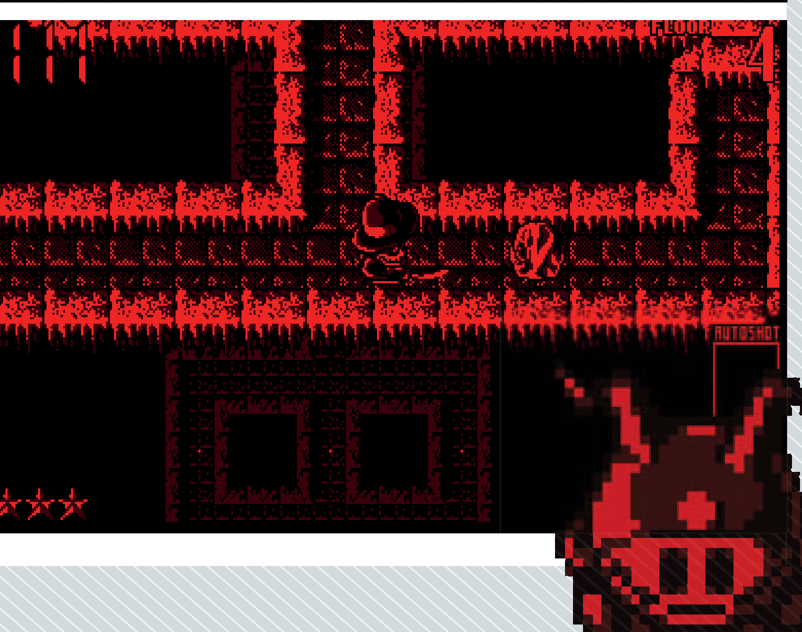
■■■ *JACK BROS.* IS certainly one of the more unusual games on Virtual Boy, although it doesn't make the most effective use of the 3D technology within the console. The first game in Atlus's *Megami Tensei* series to see release outside Japan, and also notable for eschewing its RPG roots, *Jack Bros.* is a top-down maze game in which levels are split into a series of different floors, with the 3D used to create a sense of depth between one floor and the next. In terms of the gameplay, you're given the choice of three different player characters and each utilises a different weapon to give them a bit of diversity.

The objective is to make your way through maze-style stages collecting up the requisite number of keys to open the exit to the floor below. Different enemy types and obstacles are gradually introduced, and at the end of each stage there's a boss to battle. Though the 3D effects are used subtly, the visuals are well detailed and the audio is good too. In fact, *Jack Bros.* is one of the better presented Virtual Boy titles and is certainly worth playing, particularly if you're a fan of the *Megami Tensei* series – to which this is a quirky offshoot.

FACT!

One of the rarest North American N64 games is *Ogre Battle 64*. It's also by Atlus and was shipped in small numbers.







I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Syd Bolton**
Occupation: **IT manager/Museum curator**

■■■ What is it about the Virtual Boy, and *Jack Bros.* in particular, that is attractive to you?
When the Virtual Boy came out I was in a phase where I wasn't buying a lot of videogames. When I saw one at Toys R Us for $30 I could not resist picking up two. Then, clearly bitten by the collecting bug, I had to go out and try to find all of the games. I did not realise until later (thanks to the internet) that *Jack Bros.* was so sought after.

Please tell us how and where you found the game?
I found *Jack Bros.* at a Cash Converters. They had a number of Virtual Boy games in the store and *Jack Bros.* was among them. I bought all of the games they had in the store at the time because they were all complete and in their boxes.

What condition was the game in and how much did you pay for it?
I found the game in complete condition – in the original box with the manual, the cardboard insert and the registration card. There is a slight crushing of the box on the back but it is not too bad. The shop priced all of the Virtual Boy games at $9.99, which, as I would learn later, is a great price. In fact, a few months later I found another one at the same shop and sold it on eBay. When the price soared I realised how rare it is and how much it could be worth.

Do you actually play *Jack Bros.* and, if so, what do you think of it?
It's kind of like if *Lock 'N Chase*, *Pac-Man*, *R-Type*, and *Bomberman* all got together and made a baby. I can see why the game has become valuable. Not only did it have a relatively low production run, but it's actually fun to play. I don't really suffer from the headaches that most Virtual Boy gamers develop, so I could actually probably play this one to completion (not that I have, yet).

Finally, would you ever consider selling the game or is it yours for life?
As a renowned videogame collector and the curator of the Personal Computer Museum in Canada, I could never consider selling such an important piece of gaming history. So it's definitely mine for life.

Orange and blue portals in the Atari's *Super 3D Portals 6*.

Master Chief in action on the Atari 2600, thanks to Microsoft's Ed Fries.

The screen shakes as the building crumbles in Paul Koller's *C64anabalt*.

THE DEMAKE FACTOR

Converting modern games to old computers – a retro demake – requires real dedication. **games™** talks to the programmers with the demake factor, and the creators whose games inspired them

A FAMOUS MOUNTAIN climber once said he climbed a dangerous mountain "because it was there". People who continue to create new games for old machines are like that climber in some ways. The process can be made easier thanks to the Internet, emulation and cross-development. Scans of programming manuals, websites filled with example code and online forums populated by knowledgeable people allow an entry route into the hobby. Testing is made easier by emulators and modern storage methods such as SD cards. It still requires time and effort to turn out a playable game, which is where recreating someone else's idea is an attractive first step. Modern games, be it on PC, mobile or created in Flash, are inspiring people to attempt a "retro demake".

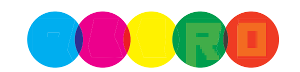
James Monkman's website www.rgcd.co.uk acts both as a retro gaming blog and a publisher of new games for retro machines. As he sees it, "It is a lot easier to recreate a game from an existing design than to come up with something original. Having said that, creating a C64 game in assembler – demake or not – is still a far from trivial task." In many cases, it is a retro game that has inspired the modern title. Creator Brandon Williamson explains his own inspiration, "I've wanted to make a game about mazes full of hundreds of tiny monsters for years, mostly inspired by the Commodore 64 game *Crossroads* which I played lots as a kid. The specific elements in *Forget-Me-Not* just sort of randomly congealed as I went along."

"I'VE WANTED TO MAKE A GAME ABOUT MAZES FULL OF TINY MONSTERS FOR YEARS"

Playing the original *Crossroads* reveals the persistent bullets wrapping around the screen and enemies warping in, now a part of *Forget-Me-Not*. When RGCD got in touch about the demake, Williamson gave his approval. "I said they could use the name *Forget-Me-Not* if they wanted, to make it an 'official' demake – but their game ended up being quite different, so they didn't. It's harder than *FMN*. I adore the cute little sprites and the whole look of it. RGCD was kind enough to send me one of the cartridges, which looks amazing – bright purple, super cute cover art and stickers! I think it's awesome. I hadn't even known people were still making and publishing C64 stuff at such a level."

Georg Rottensteiner, a retro indie games designer, first played *Forget-Me-Not* through IndieGames.com "The style looked interesting and it turned out quite addictive to play. I started dabbling in Basic back when I was seven or eight, when we got a C64 at home. Real programming started three years later with Turbo Pascal on an XT PC. *Get 'Em* was created as an entry in RGCD's 16K cartridge competition in 2011, so we had about six months." The game had travelled from C64 to iOS and back to the C64, and would return to iOS when the enhanced *Get 'Em DX* (taking fifth place in the 2012 competition) was added to Manomio's C64 emulator for iPhone.

Competitions also play a big part, providing a deadline to motivate the programmers to get projects finished. The annual mini-game competition gives a limited amount of memory to work in – 1K, 4K or 16K, with competitors on several different formats. The RGCD 16K cartridge competition has resulted in impressive C64 demakes over the last two years, and Atari fans look forward to the results of the ABBUC competition, run by the German Atari Bit Byter User Club.



Many of the original games in this feature also took part in competitions. *Continuity*, a Flash game, won Best Student Game at the 2010 Independent Games Festival and the Gameplay Innovation Award at IndieCade 2010. Ragtime Games – Guy Lima Jr. from Seattle and Stefan Mikaelsson from Stockholm, with musician Elias Holmlid – have now expanded the game further for *Continuity 2: The Continuation* on iOS. Tackling the conversion of *Continuity* to the Atari was Martin Simecek. "I've been programming since elementary school. I started with Atari Basic but my first creation in machine language was a small demo in 1999. It all changed rapidly in college because many cross-platform tools were created at that time, so programming for 8-bit Atari became much more comfortable than before and I started loving it."

"ALL OF MY GAMES FOR ATARI ARE INSPIRED BY FLASH GAMES OR MOBILE GAMES"

When he saw *Continuity* online in 2010, it rapidly became a favourite. "All of my games for Atari are inspired by Flash games or mobile games. It is very hard to invent something entirely new and original. Eventually, everything is a remake. I always want to put some added value into the game, to differentiate it from the original and make it better." The name changed to become *Ridiculous Reality* and it won the 2012 ABBUC competition. Simecek worked hard to meet the deadline. "It was really hard to finish the game on time, but we did it. I remember that last night when I was coding, debugging, fixing and linking the whole game together. It was pretty intense because I submitted the game to the competition and drove straight to the airport to catch a plane for a vacation." He has remade several Atari games in Turbo Pascal for the PC, and is considering working on Android games in the future.



The *C64anabalt* cartridge comes in a box with artwork created by Adam Atomic

The next Atari demake to look at is of Anna Anthropy's *Mighty Jill Off* for the PC. Featuring a female protagonist, it deals with some themes not frequently addressed in videogames, including lesbianism and BDSM – the latter being rather appropriate, since the game has an almost masochistic difficulty level, drawing its gameplay and looks from *Mighty Bomb Jack*. Daniel Pralle's excellent version of Jill's adventure competed in and finished second in ABBUC's 2011 event. Pralle says, "Some things were left out because of the deadline. After the deadline I added the missing parts and even added the progress bar feature. It took me around one year, but I did other Atari stuff in between. As the Atari is generally limited but has some cool features, it's better to create games which play to its strengths." Daniel is sticking to developing for the Atari, so what other retro or modern games inspire him? "*Creatures II* on the C64. Basically the reason why I started assembly programming in the first place. And someday there will be an Atari version! I also like playing the *Metroid*-style *Castlevania* games on the GBA. Currently I am developing a game that takes some aspects of this genre."

Big name games have become retro releases, requiring a compromise to work in the limitations of older machines. A first-person shooter of *Halo*'s scale would be difficult to achieve on an 8-bit machine, despite impressive efforts to scale down the likes of *Doom* (most recently appearing on the VIC-20). Ed Fries was involved in Microsoft's acquisition of *Halo* creators Bungie, and then he read the book *Racing The Beam*, a platform study of the Atari 2600 by Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost. This dissected six well-known titles and how the programmers created their code and graphics as the raster beam drew each line of the console's display onto the TV screen. The book inspired Fries to create *Halo 2600*, showing it for the first time at 2010's Classic Gaming Expo in Las Vegas. Master Chief has to explore a 64-screen maze, picking up weapons and keys as he fights the Covenant. The game finishes with a boss level, before allowing the player to restart in a harder "Legendary" mode. As well as

PAUL KOLLER

Creator of C64anabalt and Super Bread Box, C64



How long have you been programming the C64?
I started programming in Basic in the Eighties on my father's C64. I only seriously started working on C64 projects something like three years ago.

Was *Canabalt* a difficult game to convert?
From a technical perspective it's only a scrolling engine with a simple collision routine and a one-button control-scheme. One of the problems was that the building generation scheme assumes a wide-screen display, which would not be possible on the C64.

What will be added to the 64K *Super Bread Box*?
I wanted to make a version that does justice to the original. It will include unlocking weapons/characters/levels. One of the new features will be online score registering – upload your scores to a website and compete with players worldwide! There will also be new extra-challenging levels exclusive to the C64 version. All these new features take time, but in the end it will be a great package that will not disappoint!

Terry Cavanagh says your *VVVVVV* preview is "super cool" – how is it going?
I need to recode the core of the game before I can continue. Most of the other levels have already been implemented. During the initial development Terry was VERY helpful. He gave me in-depth details on how the acceleration and collisions work as to make the conversion as close as possible to the original!

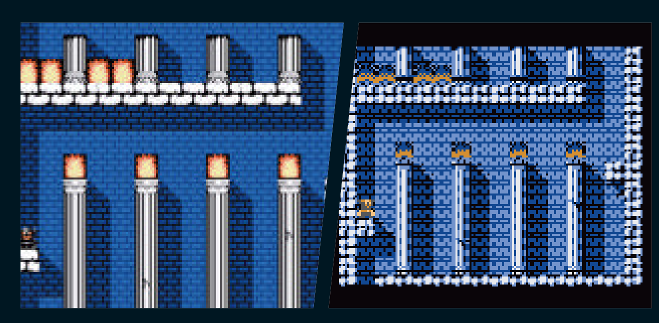
What other demakes are you planning?
Games that I've thought about converting are *Super Meat Boy*, *Cave Story*, *Hexagon*, and *Super Puzzle Platformer*, among others.



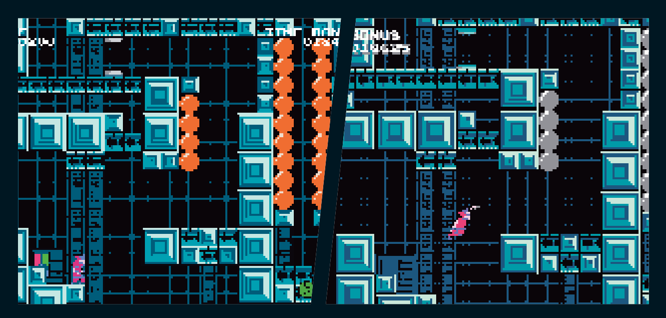
SIX OF THE BEST



Here are six of the best demakes currently available, with screenshots to compare the original game and the demake



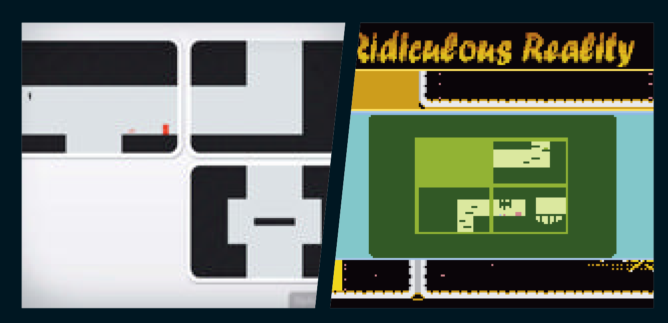
■ MIGHTY JILL OFF, PC to Atari
The dominant Queen challenges the submissive Jill to reach the top of the tower in *Mighty Jill Off*. Jill herself also went on to star as a playable character in the similarly tough *Super Meat Boy*. The beautiful Atari title screen and music are followed by an accurate conversion right down to the level layouts, with the jump and hover gameplay transferring perfectly.



■ STREEMERZ, Flash to NES
A Flash game made to look like a forgotten NES title, in the style of *Bionic Commando*. The hero escapes Master Y's fortress using his "beam" and momentum to raise him upwards – dodging hazards including killer clowns and the deadly flashing balls. Now you can play the game in an NES emulator with the ROM from www.fauxgame.com



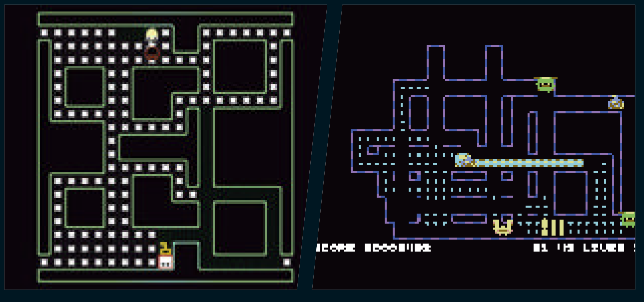
■ YOU HAVE TO WIN THE GAME, PC to C64
The presentation of *YHTWTG* includes filtering effects and a limited palette to represent an old-fashioned PC. The most recent update adds an editing mode, allowing people to create their own set of caves. The C64 version by Thilo Gurmann is incredibly faithful to the original and emulates the CGA 4-colour mode really well.



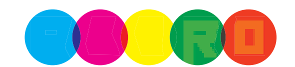
■ RIDICULOUS REALITY, Flash to Atari
The stickman platform graphics of the Flash original *Continuity* have more detail in Martin Simecek's Atari tribute. There is also the necessity to collect multiple keys en route to unlocking the exit, a feature introduced as coins in *Continuity 2* for iOS. The great title screen and music help round out the experience.



■ CANABALT, Flash to C64
Perhaps the most famous 2D "infinite runner", *Canabalt* has seen many imitators. Andreas Varga, best known for his stunning C64 *Prince Of Persia* adaptation, based his *Canabalt* conversion on the iOS release. Both official and unofficial games recreate the grey palette and parallax scrolling, with conversions of PC music to the SID chip driving the game along.

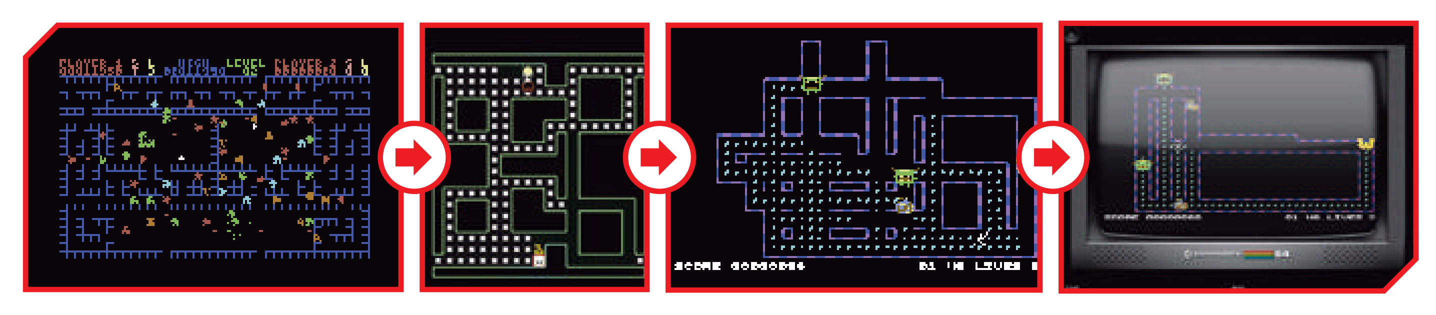


■ GET 'EM DX, iOS to C64
Georg Rottensteiner made some significant changes for his C64 implementation of *Forget-Me-Not*, as you can see. Gone are the player's constant firing and the "charging" mechanism, but the procedural generation and changing shape of the maze remain. The DX version released in 2012 added a simultaneous two-player mode.



Devolution of Crossroads

From a C64 type-in (Crossroads) to iOS hit (Forget-Me-Not) to retro demake (Get 'Em DX) and back to iOS in emulation



making the ROM available to play in emulation, limited runs of boxed cartridges were produced.

A 2D version of *Portal* created in Flash proved the inspiration for both an Atari 2600 game and a C64 equivalent. *Super 3D Portals 6* features a rendition of Jonathan Coulton's *Still Alive* on the title screen, while *Shotgate* on the C64 by Simon Quernhorst was a 4K mini-game competition entry. Both show clever approaches to a complicated control method. *Super 3D Portals* uses two joysticks, with one rotating the aim and the other providing movement. *Shotgate* uses a single fire button, the player alternately shooting out the blue or orange portal.

The biggest name recently in Flash gaming has become a mobile gaming hit, and spawned two Commodore 64 versions. *Canabalt* was created in just five days for the Experimental Gameplay Project in September 2009. The man behind the game was Adam Saltsman, known in the indie scene as Adam Atomic. "*Canabalt* was sort of a mash-up of old-school cell phone "one button" design, *Super Mario Bros.*, John Carpenter's *Escape From New York*, and *Mad Men*, among other things. The idea was to make a minimalist game that was still very exciting, but also of a reasonable scope/size to actually program and draw and execute and stuff," says Saltsman.

"THE IDEA WAS TO MAKE A MINIMALIST GAME THAT WAS STILL VERY EXCITING"

The "official" *C64anabalt* by Paul Koller was released on cartridge, with Saltsman providing the box art. Was he impressed? "It was actually pretty emotional for me to get a real cartridge of my work. When you always work in digital it can be kind of overwhelming to hold a physical artefact that sort of represents your creation (even if I didn't actually work on it!)"

Paul Koller wanted to get in touch with the original author. "I contacted Adam during the development of my C64 version, but initially only to see whether he would approve of me submitting it to the RGCD competition. Only after James Monkman said he wanted to sell physical cartridges of the game did we contact him. I knew this would be a great C64 game that would fit in 16K and that I could finish within the timeframe of the competition," says Koller. Andreas Varga took three months to create his C64 version of *Canabalt*, so what does he think of Koller's work? "I think he did an excellent job. I'd love to see what he could have done without the 16KB limit of the competition; it surely would have been even better. It's funny to see how someone else tackles the same problems and how they come up with different solutions. It reveals something about your own decision making process, how you can get stuck in a rut sometimes, just because of one decision you made early on."

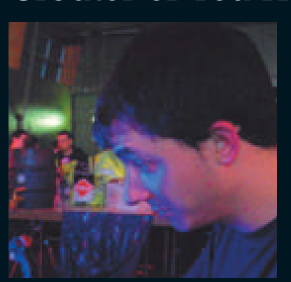
Having finished second in the 2011 competition with *C64anabalt*, Koller went one better in 2012 to win with *Super Bread Box*. This conversion of Vlambeer's *Super Crate Box* was renamed in tribute to a nickname for the original C64's brown case. Rami Ismail of Vlambeer became involved when Koller got in touch through James Monkman. "We were instantly charmed. We always claimed *Super Crate Box* was a game that could have been made in the Eighties, and here was our chance to prove it. We've been working closely with the team to help out where we can." The limitations of the competition rules did make things tough, admits Koller. "I had to remove parts of the game (for example, one of the playable characters) to try and fit it in 16K. Although the game was received quite well, people



The critically acclaimed PC title *Mighty Jill Off.*

THILO GIRMANN

Creator of You Have To Win The Game, C64



Did you get any help from J. Kyle Pittman?
He gave me the source code as well as a description of his engine and answered questions I asked. Having the source code allowed me to make an accurate conversion, but it was still a lengthy process.

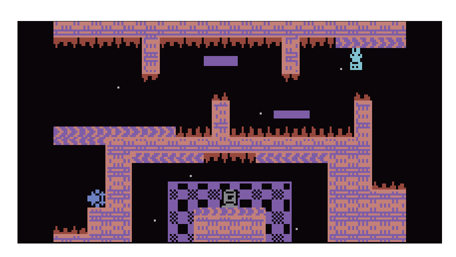
What inspired you to convert the game?
After playing this game I thought "Does this huge game map fit into C64 memory at once?" so I gave it a try, and I got a mock-up containing all the rooms but no enemies or gameplay. I sent that mock-up to Kyle and he found it awesome.

Did you set a deadline?
Since I regularly attend demo parties I planned to release it at one. The entry deadline at the party came and went, and I was watching experienced gamers playing the game. And of course the unavoidable happened – the gamer found a bug that made it impossible to finish the game 100 per cent. So coding started again, fortunately the bug was quite easy to find and fix. Replacing the bugged version with the new one was no problem. [It won the game competition at The Ultimate Meeting 2012.]

What are you planning for the enhanced cartridge version?
Less bugs, NTSC compatibility, faster transitions between rooms, loading/saving, changing controls (jumping with either fire or joystick up) and maybe a different (EGA) colour set.



■ The bright purple C64 cartridge and free stickers for *Get 'Em* DX.



■ An exclusive glimpse at the work in progress on Paul Koller's C64 version of *VVVVVV*.

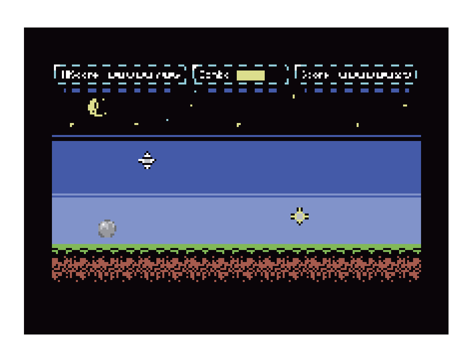
were also critical about the longevity." Koller aims to fix this with an enhanced 64K cartridge version to be released later this year, and then finish his conversion of Terry Cavanagh's *VVVVVV* – a PC game that wears its retro roots on its sleeve.

VVVVVV inspired J. Kyle Pittman's *You Have To Win The Game*, where the aim is to explore every screen of a huge maze and uncover its secrets. "I knew from the very start that I wanted to make a game about exploration, and specifically about exploring a cave, as that was often a fantasy of mine when I was younger. From there, the project sort of spiralled into a game that was not only an homage to the games I loved as a child but also to my earliest experiences with PC gaming and with learning to program in GW-BASIC." Did Pittman become involved in the C64 demake? "Thilo Girmann (see interview) contacted me in June 2012, less than two months after I'd released *YHTWTG*, to tell me he was working on a C64 port and to ask for some pointers on how I'd implemented my physics. I don't have any C64 experience myself, so my contributions were mostly in explaining some of the more esoteric aspects of my original source code. I was blown away by how faithful to the source his port was. Of course it had always been my intent to make something that could pass for an authentic retro Eighties game, but to actually see it running on a platform from that era was pretty incredible."

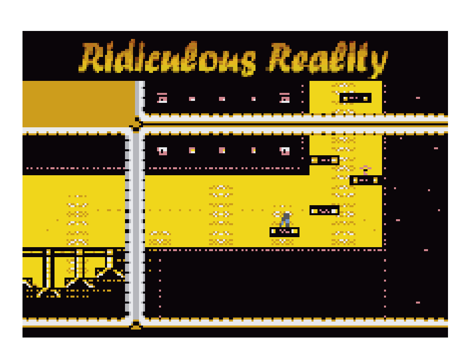
■■■ Having someone who worked on the retro formats take part in your demake adds credibility. Platform game *Sqrxz* drew inspiration from Amiga titles, so when Retroguru planned to remake it for formats including Dreamcast and the Amiga, it turned to the experienced Simon Butler. "Shahzad Sahaib contacted me out of the blue a few years ago. I've done a few things for him, he's a nice guy who gets frustrated because it's so hard to break into games doing the kind of things he wants, which are retro. I admire his old-school passion."

Was it difficult for Butler to get back into the restrictions of older machines? "The only problem seemed to be that I was out of practice, but once I warmed up the old pixel cells in my ageing brain it all fell into place and became second nature. I've done so many more mobile titles than Amiga it was more like that." Could he see himself working on more demakes? "If there was money to be made doing it then I'd jump in with both feet, but at this point in my life, financial security takes priority over artistic choices. While doing a Spectrum title does excite me ever so slightly I just don't have the time to invest in such a project."

The demake factor has several parts, then. There is a respect for modern gaming and recognition of its roots. There is the skill to code within the machine's limitations, and there is the co-operation with the original authors. Putting it all together results in new games for old machines based on new games, and they are well worth playing today. 



■ *Spike Dislike*, an iOS hit, was the debut C64 game for programmer David Eriksson.



■ The first level of *Ridiculous Reality* on Atari, based on the Flash game *Continuity*.

ESSENTIALS

10 FRANCHISES THAT DIED BEFORE THEY STARTED

Not every franchise gets to be a trans-media sensation; some just simply crumble under the weight of their own ambition. Or second-rate development cycles. Either way, not every videogame gets to be the success its developer and publisher parents envisioned it to be, sadly condemned to the bargain bins and weekly Steam sales of the world. Here **games™** presents ten franchise non-starters…



Haze
Developer: Free Radical

1 On paper, *Haze* should have been the game to bring Free Radical into the next generation as the FPS king. After building its career on the stupidly successful *TimeSplitters* series, Free Radical presented its vision for the next-generation first-person shooter in *Haze*. What started as a multi-platform release ended as a PS3 exclusive riddled with bugs, playability problems and an overdose of generic gameplay mechanics. The release not only nipped any future expansions in the bud, but it ended Free Radical entirely. The company closed its doors, putting an end to the in-development *Star Wars: Battlefront 3* and *Timesplitters 4* in the process.

APB: All Points Bulletin
Developer Realtime Worlds

2 *APB: All Points Bulletin* had the potential to spawn a franchise held in the same regard as *Saints Row*. Billed as an MMO that marries cops and robbers into a persistent turf war for San Paro, it had the potential to finally bring players into an MMO space not pre-occupied with fairies and fantasy. It was a nightmare. After five years in development, a buggy mess greeted unsuspecting players, and with the Xbox 360 version still AWOL, the future didn't look good for *APB*. Six weeks after launch, Realtime went into administration, and the game servers shut down soon after. This isn't the *GTA* clone you're looking for.

Blur
Developer Bizarre Creations

3 Coming off the back of the hugely successful *Project Gotham Racing* franchise, it looked like Bizarre Creations was ready to take pole position again with *Blur*. It incorporated the fast thrills of *PGR* with vehicular combat. While critically well received, sales just weren't there. *Blur* came out at a difficult time, released alongside *Spilt/Second* as well as *ModNation Racers*; the arcade racing genre was bursting with new IPs, and most of them faltered. While a sequel was planned, Activision instead opted to close Bizarre entirely, stating the "fundamentals of the racing genre have changed significantly."

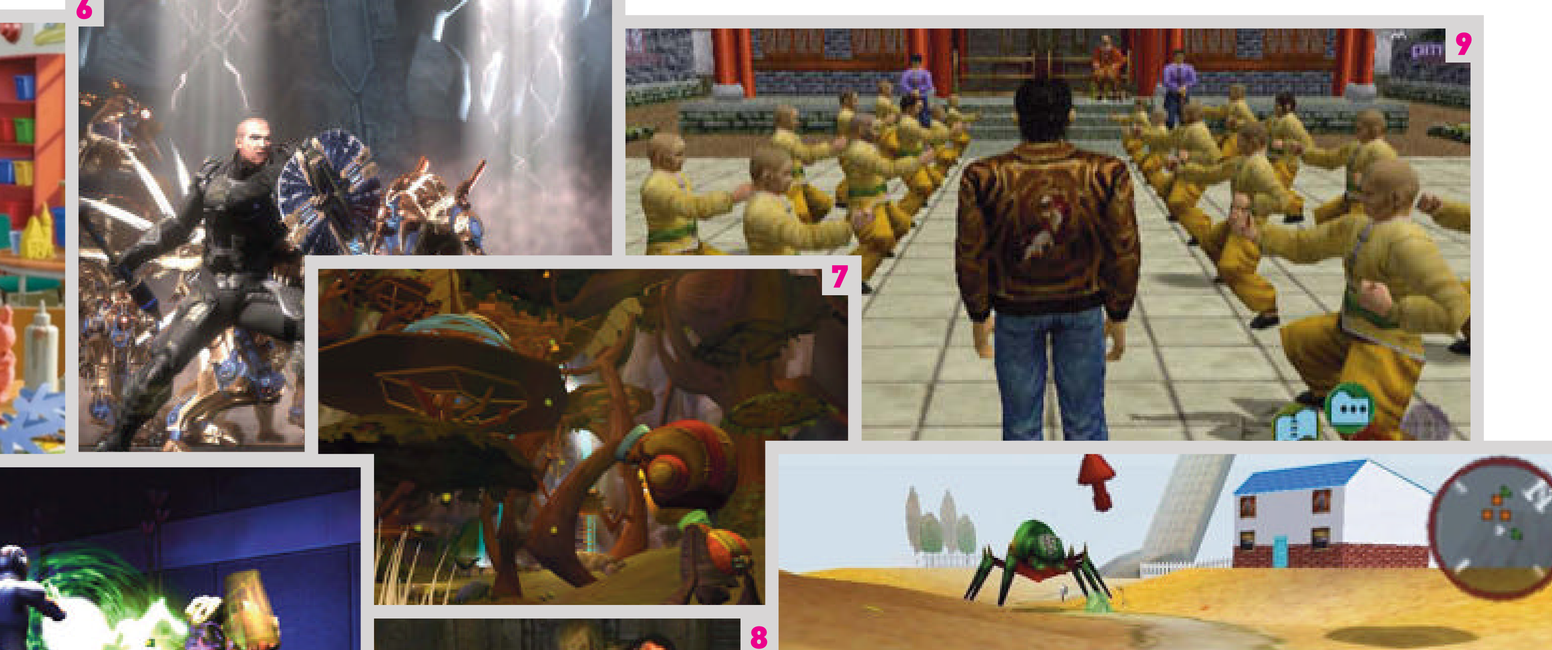
uDraw
Developer: THQ

4 When looking back at the demise of THQ, there's one clear catalyst for its very public execution. *uDraw* was a cataclysmic disaster. What should have been a moneymaking machine for the publisher over the holiday seasons for years into the future became a money-sink on par with Atari's *ET* fiasco from the Eighties. THQ's failed attempts to shoehorn the drawing tablet onto Xbox 360 and PS3 left them with 1.4 million unsold units, with THQ's CFO Paul Pucino estimating a loss of over $100 million in revenue. By the time it was discontinued, THQ barely had enough resources to right the wrongs this franchise caused.

Advent Rising
Developer: GlyphX Games

5 A brand new sci-fi action game that was intended to rival *Halo* in size and scope. Scripted by famed writer Orson Scott Card, it was planned as a trilogy that would by supported by supplementary material such as a novel and comic books penned by Card, and a PSP spin-off titled *Advent Shadow*. Despite a huge advertising campaign and a $1 million reward for the first player to discover a hidden symbol in the game, it tanked. *Advent Rising* was an unfinished heap that failed to capitalise on any of the promises it made. The dialogue was poor and the plot barely held together, we weren't sad to see this franchise go six feet under.





Too Human
Developer: Silicon Knights

6 Silicon Knights showed promise, but the dawn of a next generation really kicked the acclaimed studio in the teeth. *Too Human* was an exciting new trilogy, draped in Norse mythology and interesting mechanics. Ten years of development hell took its toll though. From lofty heights of a four-disk PlayStation 1 FPS, to being a Nintendo Gamecube exclusive to finally settling in Microsoft's bed – *Too Human* was a broken action-RPG by the time it eventually found release. Somewhat over-hyped in the years leading to its release, *Too Human* was a critical and commercial failure, leaving the planned trilogy unfinished. No huge loss, in the end.

Psychonauts
Developer: Double Fine

7 *Psychonauts* should have been the game that defined Double Fine Studios, and for good reason. It was a fantastically fun, innovative new title that redefined platformers as a viable genre in the face of a barrage of shooters. *Psychonauts* should have developed into a franchise that explored the power of the next generation consoles, but it was instead killed by marketing departments. People can't buy a game if they don't know it's coming out. Mojang's Notch recently came forward to offer assistance reviving the dead series, but balked at Tim Schafer's assertion that $18 million would be required.

Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem
Developer: Silicon Knights

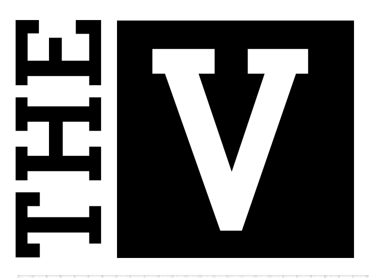
8 The thought of a successful *Eternal Darkness* franchise keeps us up at night – and for all the right reasons. When *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* hit the Gamecube in 2002 it was a breath of fresh air into a genre that had already begun a descent into over-saturation. Silicon Knights never quite got a sequel off the ground; though rumour has it they were secretly developing it parallel to doomed *X-Men: Destiny*, and with Nintendo reacquiring the trademark everything pointed towards an expansion of the *Eternal Darkness* universe on Wii U. A crippling lawsuit with EPIC put this one (and the studio) to bed.

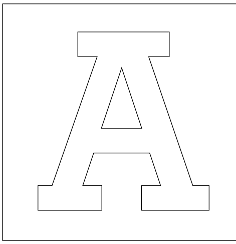
Shenmue
Developer: Sega AM 2

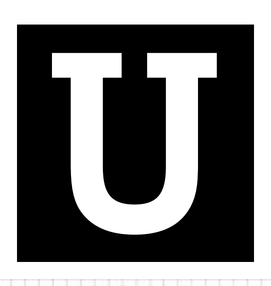
9 Simply a story of overambition and diminishing returns. *Shenmue* was released to mass acclaim when it made its Dreamcast debut, but a five-year development cycle and (at the time) the highest production costs recorded for a videogame, meant Sega simply couldn't pursue its cinematic adventure to the full extent of its planned narrative. The second instalment didn't inspire much confidence in Sega either, which managed to bring in less than a third of what its predecessor grossed. So the series sits, permanently on hold with a legion of fans ready and waiting for the franchise to expand like it deserves to.

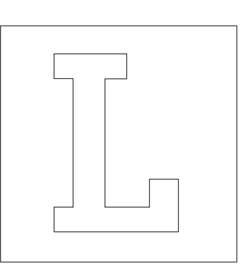
Body Harvest
Developer: DMA Design

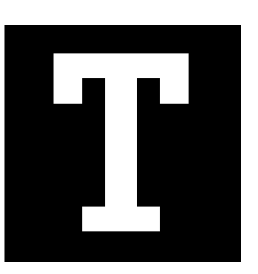
10 It's easy to balk at the success of *GTA*; it's a behemoth in the console wars, but its roots can be tracked all the way back to 1988's *Body Harvest*. *Body Harvest* had players slaughtering aliens in an attempt to save the populous of a semi-sandboxed world. Nintendo was originally set to publish the title but eventually dropped it due to concerns over the violence, lack of puzzle mechanics and unappealing nature for its Japanese audience. Thankfully the lessons learnt led to the release of *GTA* and the eventual name change of DNA Design to Rockstar North.











THE ART OF BIOSHOCK INFINITE

MANUFACTURER: **Dark Horse** / PRICE: **£29.99**

NOW DARK HORSE is offering an enticing glimpse into the creative process behind the landmark videogame. *The Art Of BioShock Infinite* is a fascinating compendium of design documents, sketches of abandoned concepts and gorgeous paintings encapsulating the scope of Irrational Games' vision.

The Irrational Games co-founder outlines the strain of crafting a unique game world such as Columbia, and the tremendous lengths the design team endured to ensure the world of *BioShock Infinite* would become a unique prospect. The entire 184 pages is littered with fascinating discoveries: districts of Columbia abandoned, enemies that failed to make the cut and the various designs of Elizabeth before Irrational landed on her final iconic look we see in the finished product.

Perhaps the most interesting insight is the development of Songbird. At one point a menacing figure that more closely resembled *BioShock*'s Big Daddy (one design even features a globular automaton accompanied by a similarly mechanised little girl), the various iterations that eventually lead to the screeching guardian of Elizabeth are representative of *Infinite*'s evolution from straightforward *BioShock* sequel to an innovative new landscape that shares the same universe. It lacks extensive commentary but the exquisiteness of the art almost speaks for itself, making for one of the most lovingly compiled and absorbing accompaniments for a videogame on the market. Do your coffee table a favour and explore the world of Columbia once more.



GAMING CLOTHING



PORTAL 2 APERTURE TEST SUBJECT TRACK JACKET

Ever wanted to feel like a worthless participant in a cruel, pointless demoralising trial? Well, that's life. Also: buy this jacket from *Portal 2*. **tinyurl.com/c6xravp**



VITRUVIAN MINECRAFT

If you know anything about Roman architects, then you might find this *Minecraft*-inspired tee tickles your fancy. **tinyurl.com/cqefeuw**



WORLD OF WARCRAFT PANDA ZIP-UP HOODIE

The world loves pandas. Why else would Blizzard create a whole expansion for *World Of Warcraft* around the bamboo-munching furballs? Anyway, celebrate your adoration with this adorable hoodie. **tinyurl.com/bn4rkce**

NEO GEO X GOLD

MANUFACTURER: **SNK** / PRICE: **£175**

IF THERE'S A retro hole in your life you need to fill, it's worth considering picking up the Neo Geo X Gold for the eye-watering sum of £175 – just above the asking price for a NeoGeo game back in the day. This portable version of the console comes loaded with 20 built-in games packed inside its robust casing. You get roughly get five hours battery life from the machine, but that's more than enough time to rattle through *The King Of Fighters '95* and *Metal Slug*, while completely disregarding the presence of the dreadful *Cyber Lip*.



SEGA MEGA DRIVE ARCADE CLASSIC

MANUFACTURER: **AtGames** / PRICE: **£42.99**



ANOTHER NINETIES CONSOLE has been slimmed down and stuffed with a limited selection of retro titles, appealing to those without access to any virtual shops, illegal emulators (not that we condone them) or common sense. Despite its questionable relevance, it does feature some of the Mega Drive's most memorable titles – *Streets Of Rage*, *Golden Axe* and *Alex Kidd*. However, titles like these comprise only 20 of the console's vaunted 60 built-in games – the last forty consisting of dodgy-looking rip-offs and abysmal Windows 95 rejects. It could be worse, but it doesn't offer the value for money that you'd expect from looking at the box – or much *Sonic* content, for that matter.

STARCRAFT II RAZER BANSHEE

MANUFACTURER: **RAZER** / PRICE: **£79.99**

WE'RE NOT SURE why an audio headset needs a tagline, but Razer's Banshee has one anyway: 'Call down the thunder'. Why it asks us to do this when using its *StarCraft II* branded peripheral we don't know, and we've not found yelling like Thor into the microphone to have any particular effect. Nevertheless, the chunky headphones do relay an impressive depth to in-game sounds, and the simplicity of its outputs make it suitable for those who'd rather not be predisposed untangling ten miles of wires. It also features several purple lights, which in no way emphasises how ridiculous you'll sporting this fine piece of audio headgear.





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INTERVIEW
EVE ONLINE
On the eve of EVE Online's
tenth anniversary, CCP
examines the past decade
THE ELDER
SCROLLS ONLINE
ZENIMAX ONLINE STUDIOS VENTURES BEYOND THE LEVEL CAP
TO DISCUSS THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE'S END GAME

AS ELDER SCROLLS TURNS TO ONLINE, WE SPEAK WITH ZENIMAX CREATIVE DIRECTOR PAUL SAGE ON WHAT PLAYERS CAN EXPECT FROM THE ENDGAME

The Elder Scrolls Online

Big-budget massively multiplayer games are a dying breed. Following the near collapse of *Star Wars: The Old Republic* in 2012, launching and maintaining an MMO, whether it be a new IP or one built on the foundation of an existing license, is a risky business. It's surprising, then, to see ZeniMax Online Studios forging forward with *The Elder Scrolls Online* with such fervour.

A lot has been said about *ESO* in recent weeks following the first stages of the closed beta and hands-on opportunities at trade shows. While initial feedback has been wholly positive, it's what ZeniMax *isn't* talking about that has us truly excited. As any MMO player worth their purple loot knows, it's what happens once that EXP bar stops filling that really comes to define the lasting experience.

The importance of endgame content can't be understated. Solid games like *Star Trek Online* were quickly left with diminishing servers following a lack of suitable endgame solutions, while *World Of Warcraft* continues to thrive with its regular patches and grinding daily quests.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: **PC, Mac**
PUBLISHER: **Bethesda**
DEVELOPER: **ZeniMax**
ORIGIN: **USA**

"We actually break down our veteran experience into six groups," began creative director Paul Sage as we discussed ZeniMax's strategy for keeping players engaged at the Level 50 level cap and beyond. "There will be a large variety of activities for players past our level cap."

In *Elder Scrolls Online*, you begin your adventure by aligning your character with one of three factions. The High Elves, Wood Elves and stealthy Khajiit make up the Aldmeri Dominion. The Daggerfall Convenant is made up of the Bretons, Orcs and Redguards, and the final faction is that of the Ebonheart Pact, an alliance forged between the Nords, Dark Elves and the lizard-like Argonians. Having three factions yields serious benefits for the MMO connoisseur. While most games will feature one branching story, *Elder Scrolls Online* has three whole territories for you to explore, each with its own story, quests and zones.

Your chosen faction will determine who you are able to talk and interact with throughout the course of the narrative leading you to Level 50. Once you reach the cap, previously inaccessible zones from rival factions will become available with enhanced loot and difficulty. Once you've finished the second zone you can then take on the third, with each faction's area you complete opening up the races that you're able to interact with directly.

Those fans that are coming into *Elder Scrolls Online* expecting to bask in the lore and history of Tamriel shouldn't be disappointed. Set a thousand years before *Skyrim*, there will be plenty to explore in this world. With each area said to contain over 120 hours of content, this could be the vastest iteration of *Elder Scrolls* to date.

ZeniMax is aware, of course, that a large portion of the player base is coming to *ESO* to finally experience *Elder Scrolls* with a party of friends, and the game certainly







Elder Scrolls Online is going to have three whole areas to explore for determined players, which adds up to over 300 hours for those obsessed with lore and exploration.

"With each area said to contain over 120 hours of content, this could be the vastest iteration of Elder Scrolls to date"



While no pricing model has been announced yet, we expect *Elder Scrolls Online* to launch free-to-play.

ZeniMax is ditching the behind the scenes dice rolls for combat in *Elder Scrolls Online*, instead the studio is implementing a system closer to that of the console games.

won't disappoint in this respect. "Our small group PvE will be based around Master Level Dungeons available at level cap," Sage explained, detailing how each of the 16 zones features a four-player instanced dungeon, with most boasting a Level 50 equivalent that players can return to at endgame that "[is] tuned much harder and [has] a different story the second time." For small groups of friends, this sounds like an essential part of the endgame, with groups able to mix and match classes, skill trees and weapon types to properly explore the 30 or so dungeon experiences *ESO* will feature at launch.

For some, the MMO experience is defined by raiding. However, Sage wasn't willing to discuss the intricacies of the Adventure Zones with us – it's here where large groups of players can go out into Cyrodiil and activate large-scale battles. In essence they sound like the world bosses found throughout *The Old Republic* and *World Of Warcraft*, though with *The Elder Scrolls Online*'s emphasis on action-driven combat we struggle to see how tactical battles will handle outside of the confined four-man instances.

The final pillar of *Elder Scrolls Online*'s endgame is perhaps the most exciting. *The Elder Scrolls*' PvP, dubbed Alliance War, is a 200-player war zone that will incorporate every aspect of *The Elder Scrolls Online*'s gameplay. "Alliance War is an entirely different way to experience *Elder Scrolls*. You'll get to participate in the war in a grand scale against other players," said Sage. "Around 200 people on the screen at once with no change in performance, and over 2,000 at one time in Cyrodiil itself. We'll track your progress in the war, reward players and guilds for doing well in the war effort.

"Solo players can hunt other solo players, or quest. Small groups can take over farms, hunt other solo players… and the thing that's really special is the number of objectives for large groups of people. Large groups will be able to take keeps and they will have other larger objectives, [such as] taking keeps, defence [and] artifact acquirement. Players will have a variety of tools to help in the larger objectives such as ballistae, catapults, and battering rams. These activities will definitely be things players enjoy throughout their play experience."

Elder Scrolls Online is still many months away, but as we move ever closer to the limited beta this summer, it is certainly shaping up well. ZeniMax has its heart in the right place, but all eyes are on the studio to defy expectation and launch an MMO without a life expectancy.

AUTHENTICITY

PLAYERS WERE INITIALLY worried that *ESO* wasn't going to provide an authentic *Elder Scrolls* experience, but ZeniMax has been working on a first-person mode that makes the game look closer to *Skyrim* and *Oblivion*. "We're extremely excited to be working on it. And it definitely adds a huge amount to the immersion of the game. That said, the immersion comes at the cost of some situational awareness. We're doing everything we can to make sure both styles of play have as much of both immersion and situational awareness as possible. That said, we suspect people will use both views, switching between each depending on what they are doing at the time."

WildStar

WE TAKE A LOOK AT HOW THIS SCI-FI MMO COULD REINVIGORATE THE GENRE

It feels like we've been talking about *WildStar* forever. Announced way back in 2011, Carbine Studios and NCsoft's ambitious MMO has long promised to shake up the saturated science-fiction wing of the massively multiplayer industry, but in that time we've seen everything from *TERA* to *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (for the most part) fail to properly execute their visions against a market that's becoming increasingly difficult to please.

Even in the face of adversity, then, Carbine Studios is ready to unleash *WildStar* upon a waning audience, and during our time at PAX East, **games™** finally got a chance to see what all the hype was about.

MMOs have a habit of sticking to genre convention and, with *World Of Warcraft* still sitting atop the throne, who can blame them? But *WildStar* is looking to shake up that expectation by letting players truly define who they want to be within the expansive science-fiction world of planet Nexus. We aren't just talking about your standard professional archetypes either; Warrior, Mage, Rogue and Healer are but the starting points of your journey. After choosing your class, you're then given the opportunity to select a 'path', and it's here where *WildStar*'s innovative systems come into play.

The path archetypes available thus far are Soldier, Scientist, Settler and Explorer – though they aren't simply ways to diversify your combat stance. They instead determine how you tackle quests as well as explore and interact with the world at large.

Soldiers find opportunities in violence; a character on this path is rewarded with bountiful amounts of combat and works best when provoking large public quests. One example given has Soldiers building a holdout that, when other players join you inside, spawns waves of yetis to hold back, eventually cumulating in a unique raid boss,

INFORMATION

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NCSoft**
DEVELOPER: **Carbine Studios**
ORIGIN: **South Korea**



Enemies signal their combat clearly in area of attack circles around you, which gives the player ample time to dodge out of attacks to earn bonus points.



The world of *WildStar* is certainly vibrant; its graphical style evokes a *Borderlands* feel, though it's inherently less chaotic.



HOME COMFORTS

One of the most interesting ideas being explored by *WildStar* is found within its robust housing system. It's long been missing from *WOW*, with Blizzard citing design difficulties in the past. However, *WildStar* gives players the opportunity to buy a plot of land and build upon it. With myriad looks and layouts to choose from, it looks robust enough to catch our attention. Players can also decorate the inside with items such as furniture, lamps and chains – and, of course, build plenty of space to display trophies from particularly difficult kills. You're free to place items virtually anywhere in your home – a helpful tool considering you can invite players in your home to talk tactics and hang out after a long day of adventuring. Interestingly, Carbine has promised that players will be able to build items into their homes as well, like raid teleporters and crafting stations. What this means for the virtual high streets of Nexus we aren't quite sure, but it seems nowhere is safe any more.

■ Being able to build your own house will certainly help players quickly build a tight community, though we expect microtransactions will tie in heavily.

not otherwise seen in the world. Each path has similar abilities: Scientists are rewarded for digging deep into Nexus and exploring its mysterious ruins; Settlers bask in social situations and can even upgrade player hubs to gain access to special social quests; Explorers find their rewards through seeking out remote areas and hidden caverns.

WildStar wants to reward you for playing the game how you want to play it, completely tailoring its structure to supplement your motivations. While it's too early to tell if publisher NCsoft will be successful in its pursuit, it certainly sounds like a refreshing experience.

Couple this innovative character creation system with the dynamic questing and *WildStar* might just be the kick the MMO scene has needed in the last few years. The developer is of course cramming the game with as many instances, public quests, platforming puzzles and world events as possible – but its intention is to keep you constantly preoccupied. Carbine Studios is aiming to have quests introduced every half an hour, where one quest leads to another, which leads to a challenge mode, which leads to an instance. It might sound like hand-holding, but it could be the drive that players need to take this new MMO from start to finish.



"None of the exploration would be fun without a decent combat system to back it up, and thankfully WildStar is doing its best to inject a little life into the behind-the-scenes dice rolls that have come to define the modern MMO"



Speaking of endgame, that's a facet of design Carbine is keeping close to its chest, though we've been told that it is here where players will get the opportunity to fully explore the world and its lore. It sounds worlds away from the raid-grind found in most competitors' games.

Of course, none of this would be remotely fun without a decent combat system to back it up, and thankfully *WildStar* is doing its best to inject a little life into the behind-the-scenes dice rolls that have come to define the modern MMO. While in combat, double-tapping any movement key lets the player complete a dodge – it takes movement to a place where it's not usually found. It might not sound like a big addition, but from our brief hands-on session we could certainly see the benefits, though how this will combine with an otherwise stock mechanic over a longer game session sadly alludes us at this time.

We still don't have a price, release date or gameplay model (though we certainly wouldn't rule out the free-to-play option considering *The Old Republic*'s recent success following its switch), so *WildStar* certainly has a little way to go before it finds itself in players hands. Our playtest revealed a fun world ripe for exploration, dressed in a vibe that blurs the lines between *Borderlands* and *Firefly*.

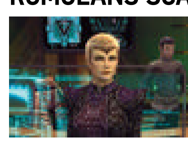
We are eager to get more time with *WildStar* as, simply enough, we've been burnt before. Fingers crossed, though – *WildStar* is shaping up to be an interesting addition to a shrinking library of MMO games.



UPDATES

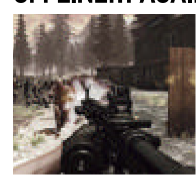
THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

ROMULANS SCATTERED



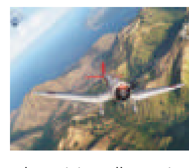
■ Following the destruction of their homeworld, the Romulans have been drifting through the virtual space of *Star Trek Online*. This summer, however, Cryptic is releasing the Legacy Of Romulus DLC, finally giving players an insight into the troubled race's splintered tribes and plight to find a new home.

THE WAR Z GOES OFFLINE... AGAIN



■ *The War Z*, Hammerpoint Interactive's controversial open-world zombie shooter, just can't seem to catch a break. After suffering months of harassment from disgruntled players, it was taken offline again this month after hackers brought the servers down and compromised players' sensitive information. Better change those passwords, folks.

WORLD OF WARPLANES NOW FLYING TOWARDS THE HORIZON



■ *World Of Warplanes* may still be in testing, but as we move ever closer to release it is really starting to impress. It already has over 100 fully customisable planes and ten playable maps, each with its own dynamic weather system. More on this in the coming months.

BACK TO THE BROWSER AS RUNESCAPE RETURNS

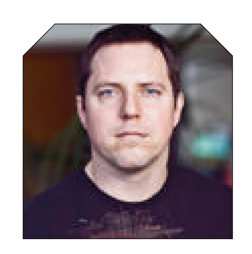


■ Popular browser-based MMO *RuneScape* is closer to unleashing its next set of updates as *RuneScape 3* beta registration begins in April. The updates are bringing new areas, as well as graphical and audio upgrades. Expect the beta to run through the summer before its official release this autumn.



GUILD CHAT

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



Ned Coker

Senior PR specialist, CCP Games

As EVE Online reaches its tenth year of galactic service, ushering in both 500,000 subscribers and an exciting new PS3 free-to-play tie-in with Dust 514, **games™** speaks to Ned Coker to see what's on the cards for CCP Games in 2013 and beyond.



500,000 subscribers must be up there with the biggest subs-based MMOs around, after *WOW*. What's the churn rate like?
EVE Online has never pretended to be the easiest game to get into of course, but our churn is pretty enviable. We've grown every single year *EVE* has been out and typically once someone sticks to the game for a couple of months, they begin uncovering layers of the game (mostly the highly social aspect) that keep them around for much longer. I think the level of communication we have with our players and the accelerated content delivery with around two big free expansions per year help tremendously.

What are the challenges of dealing with clever, manipulative and high profile players?
It's a luxury problem to be honest. We wouldn't exchange our clever players for anything, as they make up the game itself and are just as much a part of what our subscribers pay for as access to wormholes and the ability to fire massive lasers. For each minute of headache we get from the wiliest ones, the other players probably get hundreds of days worth of content from them. I'd like to say we see everything coming like some sort of omnipotent space gods, but there's not really a way that we can plan for human ingenuity. As long as there's nothing breaking the End User License Agreement, we tend to let things take their course.

Will there be any announcements at this year's fanfest?
Yes. Lots. This year is the 10th Anniversary of *EVE* so we've got a lot of retrospectives and of course forward looking stuff too. Also, *Dust 514* will also be a pretty massive part of the celebration since it shares the same universe now. We'll be live streaming it for free so everyone can check it out.

The MOMA exhibit definitely answers the question "can videogames be art?", doesn't it?
I think it echoes what videogame players have been saying for years, that the videogame entertainment form has truly become more than entertainment. In *EVE*, the participatory aspect of being a contributor of a virtual society that's essentially creating a shared history of hundreds of thousands of people over many years, it's more meta – art as a storytelling engine more than anything else, where players act as both real time actors and playwrights on the same grand stage.

It's heartening to see that level of recognition come to the industry, as a gamer, especially with such a thoughtfully curated mix of wellknown and more niche games. I think the exhibit lends even credence to the idea that art can be found in "new" and interesting mediums and it should be looked for without bias as to the source.

Sony seems to have become the first console manufacturer to become friendly to MMOs and you've got a good relationship with them. Can you see yourself producing anything for PS4?
At the moment CCP is 100 per cent focused on delivering *Dust 514* on PS3. The PS4 looks to be a powerful console, and we look forward to exploring the possibilities with Sony down the road.

> "I'd like to say we see everything coming, like some sort of omnipotent space gods"





This month *Dust 514* finally combines with the epic world of *EVE Online*, PS3 players will have direct influence over conflicts in the sky.



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